

Behind the Scenes at the TOC

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The following article was written in 1990 about the Tournaments of Champions table tennis tournaments held in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1990. It was easily the most disastrous table tennis tournament in U.S. history. To make it a little easier to follow the narrative, here, to the best of my recollection, is the schedule:

Tue. June 5	Registraion Opens
Fri. June 8—Sun. June 10	The Fifth World Veterans Championships
Mon. June 11	Opening Ceremonies, Sightseeing Trips, Party
Tue. June 12	Finals of World Veterans Championships First day of U.S. Open
Wed. June 13—Sat. June 16	U.S. Open
Sun. June 17	International Junior Championships

Possibly a few matches in the U.S. Open were scheduled for Sun. June 17.

I was the technical director (whatever that means—I made up my own title) for the TOC (Tournaments of Champions) in Baltimore. I wrote the computer software, set up all the computers, made the draws and time schedule, and just generally caused trouble. (One of the many things I didn't do was the data entry.)

If you were at the TOC in Baltimore, you may have noticed we were having some operational difficulties (yes, I'm being sarcastic). For example, on Sunday morning (June 10) we called a let on all tables to announce we were having "computer problems". (It should go without saying that at a well run tournament one does not stop play to apologize for problems.) I am going to tell you something of what was going on. Am I doing this just to defend myself? Well, maybe. Let me explain.

I was in Baltimore from early morning Saturday (June 2) through Sunday (June 17). This was easily the most stressful two weeks of my life. It was very rough on most of the staff. As the TOC was winding down, one staff person told me that he had heard two players in the elevator talking about how wonderful a tournament it was. He had to restrain himself from strangling them. Now I don't really know what most of the participants thought. Possibly many of

them had a good time. Certainly the staff was coming very close to killing each other. My first inclination after the tourney was to write a brief letter to Topics in which I thanked some people and conspicuously didn't thank others. However, I eventually decided that while this would be a lot of fun it would be counterproductive.

However, I have been hearing what people thought was going on. These comments remind me of the parable of the seven blind men and the elephant. One staff person thought we had too many participants. (I suppose it goes without saying that the fewer participants the better!) A player said that the problem was that we let the players talk to the people who were typing results into the computer. A staff person said that what we needed to do was get 84 pairs of chairs (1 pair for each table) and have the players sit in them while waiting for their matches. A staff person who worked registration was incredulous when I pointed out that we were incapable of making sure that people had registered before we let them play. (If you also are incredulous, then I should point out that at the time we were more interested in finishing the matches before 2:00 a.m. than in making sure that everyone had paid.) Paddle Palace said "the computer tracking system ... backed up" (and then managed to take credit for the tournament!). A top staff person thought our main problem was that a bunch of entries had been lost. Half the staff blamed the computer system. A player spent an hour explaining to me that all we had to do was use double clipboards. (No, I am not going to explain why we didn't.) And of course millions of people said that the problem was that we weren't organized. Well, as we were fond of saying, we were "terribly organized".

I will try to explain what was happening and why it was happening. However, the interesting things are the things that weren't working. If I were to name names, you might get the idea that I was blaming people. Well if you were standing near me in Baltimore you probably heard me blame a lot of people. However, this is not the place to find fault, but rather to give an idea of the problems — mainly because problems are interesting and partly because we can learn from our mistakes. So I will conceal whom I blame for each problem. In fact I will conceal facts whose only use is to decide who should be blamed. In other words, I am giving an incomplete picture; you can't use it to deduce who is at fault. In general I will use the word "we" to indicate the tournament. It does not mean I was personally involved, although I frequently was. Certainly if I had been a lot smarter I could have anticipated many of the problems and handled them. By the way I use the word "he" as the neuter pronoun.

I've shown this article to several people. Usually the first thing they say to me after reading it starts with "All you had to do was ...". Well, as should become clear, there is no magic solution. There is no one thing that would have solved all the problems.

First some background. This tournament was different from all other tournaments. Last year's Open had 600 players, a staff of 20, and a budget of \$150,000. This year's U.S. Nationals in Berkeley had 300 players, a staff of 20,

and a budget of \$40,000 (we were intentionally overstaffed). The TOC had 2300 players (1100 in the Veterans, 1450 in the Open, and 150 in the Junior) plus 600 nonplayers such as staff, coaches, and guests, and a budget of \$1,000,000. These figures include a staff of 150. Planning started more than two years before. I spent 21 months building the computer system software. I don't do this for a living, so I did it in my "spare time". I figure I put in around 2000 hours before the tournament even started. We had several weekend meetings of the top staff in Baltimore over the year preceding the tournament.

I should mention that some things worked well. In particular physical operations, video, press, and transportation. These were things that I had very little to do with (perhaps that is why they worked). Most of the problems seemed to be related in some way to me. (That is, I had to be involved in managing the problems.) We did have some problems that I had nothing to do with: the party and the hotels come to mind. I won't discuss these since I don't know enough about them. Also the publicity was not a great success although it was respectable. As far as the operation of the tournament is concerned we had three major problems:

- Data entry
- Hans Westling
- Training

I'll explain each of these.

The pre-tournament processing of the entry forms was atrocious. Ideally all the data on the entry forms should have been entered into the computer by the middle of May which would have given us a couple of weeks to do the draws and time schedule. Actually the last player was entered into the computer on Sunday (June 3) and the draws for the Veterans were made on Monday (June 4) at 4:30 a.m. This may not sound as bad as it was. After all the tournament didn't start until Friday (June 8). Yes, but registration opened Tuesday (June 5) afternoon and we were supposed to give every player a copy of the draws when he registered. We needed about a day for the Xerox place to make the 1500 copies. In addition we agreed to FAX Hans the draws Monday morning so he could check them. We set noon as the deadline for him to respond. Of course he was out sightseeing until late afternoon. So the draws were Xeroxed, then Hans called us with changes, and so we made up an errata sheet.

Being late would have been bad enough, however the quality of the data was terrible. To demonstrate this, here is a little quiz. Find your copy of the TOC program and look at the player list. Try to find Jorgen Persson's name. Here are some more examples: The computer had half the entries in the Parent-Child doubles listed as without partners. (This is unbelievable: people don't enter that event without partners.) A Japanese high school showed up with 20 kids and we had no record. (They said they sent a FAX.) I could go on and on. I have no idea of the correct figure, but it felt like at least a quarter of the players had something wrong with their entries.

Now for the second main problem. Hans Westling is the president of the Veterans World Championships Executive Committee of the Swaythling Club. He is a very nice gentleman who makes perfectly reasonable sounding requests which cause endless trouble. He requested two changes to the time schedule. The first was to play the doubles round robins Saturday (June 9) morning instead of Friday (June 8) evening. We agreed to this Thursday (June 7) evening.

The second request was that no U.S. Open veterans events start until all finals in the Veterans Worlds were finished. He claimed that we had agreed to this a year ago, but we didn't remember. So we agreed to it Monday night (June 11).

I spent the week of May 28 making the time schedule. For the Open we had tried to do the following. On Tuesday (June 12) play a lot of rounds of the veterans events because the veterans will have been here a long time and will want to get their matches over with. For the ratings events that started on Tuesday (June 12) only play the round robins.

So Monday night (June 11) after the party, I revised the time schedule so all veterans events in the U.S. Open started after 5:00 p.m. Tuesday (June 12). I tried to only change the schedule for the veteran events. There were two reasons for this: The first was I didn't have much time and the fewer events that I had to redo, the less time it would take. The second was I thought there would be less confusion if the schedule for the other events wasn't changed; the veterans would all be later than originally scheduled (so if you used the old schedule you wouldn't miss your match). If I changed everything some things would be scheduled for earlier than before.

My first attempt at a revised time schedule had the first elimination round of the over-40 on Friday (June 15)! Groups on Tuesday (June 12) at 5:00, next round on Friday (June 15). This clearly wasn't going to work. So I squeezed the rounds in by decreasing the spacing between rounds. My main criteria were not to play two events at the same time that would be expected to conflict, not to exceed the number of tables we had, and to have the veterans events have a not too unreasonable schedule. Now the original schedule was heavy, but it was reasonably spread out. (After all we had more than twice as many players as a year ago.) For the new schedule we were playing almost no matches Tuesday (June 12) until 5:00 p.m., then we were very very heavy through Wednesday (June 13) and Thursday (June 14). On Friday (June 15) we were essentially back to the original schedule. If you were at the tournament, then you may have noticed that these were our difficult times (at least for the Open, the Veterans had different problems). In particular Friday (June 15) went well as did the first Friday (June 8) when the Veterans started — clearly we should have only run the tournament on Fridays (that's a joke). I should mention that the computer helps make the time schedule, but I have to look at the results and try different things. So it takes time. For a 5:00 a.m. time schedule the result wasn't too bad. At the 1989 U.S. Open, where we did the schedule by hand, we ended up putting out over 100 round robins at the same time on only 70 tables (or something like

that).

Our third major problem was training (this depends on your point of view — you could say the problem was staffing). This problem is complicated and is related to our organizational structure. Yes we did have an organizational structure. However, it was basically a scaled up version of the same structure that you would use to run a small tournament. There are two fundamentally different types of organizational structures which I'll call flat and military. We used a flat structure when we should have used a military structure. This was particularly noticeable at two spots. At the very top we had a committee where we should have had one person. The second spot was the control desk. We had planned on four shifts of 6-8 people (with a fifth shift of 3 people for the arena). We should have had two shifts of 12 people.

So what is the big deal? Four shifts of 6 or two shifts of 12 doesn't sound like much difference. However, it entails a radical shift in the approach to organization affecting such things as what the individual jobs are, how the people must be trained, how much experience they must have, and who is in control. If 6 people are going to run the control desk at a tournament of this size, then each of them must be an expert and they must function as equals (a flat management structure). Each must be prepared to do whatever needs to be done at that moment and must be able to decide what should be done next. In other words each person must be able to do all of the jobs. Ideally the 6 people will function as a unified team with each person essentially able to read the mind of the others. For example, you can't spend ten minutes looking for a draw sheet that was left in a different place, or tell some of the players to go out to the table while another staff person is telling the players to come to the control desk.

Now shift paradigms and imagine that we have 12 people on a shift. Then 10 of the people can be given simple well-defined jobs which they spend all their time doing. These jobs are simple enough that they can be explained to inexperienced staff. The remaining two jobs require a real understanding of how the desk should operate. Here are the jobs. Two people handle processing of all completed match cards and posting of updated draw sheets. Two people handle clipboard return. They check that the match cards are filled out correctly and that the balls are returned (actually we should have just given everyone a ball when they registered). There are three clipboard stations each having responsibility for one third of the tables. Each station needs two people. One of the people does not talk to the players. He just sorts the match cards and clipboards and can help hand the clipboard to the players. The other person talks to the players and finds out who they are. However, any problems or questions that can't be answered by looking at the match cards are referred to the remaining two people. These are the shift leaders. They handle all problems and generate the new match cards.

If you had asked me before the tournament which was the best way to organize, I would have said use the flat organization. Now there is no question in

my mind that the military organization is infinitely better.

We were also understaffed. I'm not sure that we even had enough people for two shifts of 12.

I'll mention two more related problems, and then I'll shift gears. One problem was we didn't make it clear to the staff what the organizational structure was and who had authority. For example several people told me that since we sort of told them they were working on blank and that X was in charge of blank, they either waited for X to tell them what to do and/or were reluctant to do things without approval from X. In other words they thought there was a more rigid chain of command than I thought there was. Then if other people than X (such as me or Gordon or a tournament director) told them what to do, they would do it, but would then let the next person to come along override the previous instruction. It turned out that my title caused problems. Since many of the staff didn't understand what my job was, I had trouble getting them to listen to me, and then they wouldn't tell me when someone else gave them conflicting instructions. Also I wasn't always told of things I needed to know about. It seems clear that the solution to this is an explicit chain of command which is made clear to all staff. Unfortunately the second problem somewhat conflicts with this. Several people who we thought we were placing in positions of authority did not exercise their authority and did not properly supervise their staff. And we had no mechanism for replacing them with someone else or detecting that there was a problem until it was too late.

Enough abstraction. I'm now going to give a feel for what the tournament was like for me. Not every incident has a point, but they serve to set the mood. Let's skip ahead to the start of the Veterans (I've already been in Baltimore a week and am ready to go home). Thursday night (June 7) is to be a long night. We have an incredible number of changes to the draws (mainly due to the poor data entry). By 3:00 a.m. we have the singles straightened out, but we are too tired to do the doubles. Besides we have moved them to Saturday (June 9). I'm not sure that we would have them ready if we had to have them for Friday (June 8).

Friday (June 8) is easy for the control desk. (Saturday (June 9) would be different.) Just round robin singles. Every two hours the desk puts out 80 groups. No problem. We kid the control desk that they are doing too good a job, since the players then come to the problem desk and ask about the draws for the next stage of the singles or the doubles round robins which of course aren't ready.

Friday (June 8) night is very difficult for us. We have to make all the changes to the doubles and make the draws for the second stage of the singles. We finish around 4:00 a.m. Saturday morning (June 9) I don't show up until around noon. Things are already bogging down. There are still a lot of problems with the doubles. For example, the players would go play and just write on the printed match card their changes to the information (e.g., doubles partners) without telling the control desk. Since every team advances to the next stage, we have

to put all these changes into the computer so the next day's draws (made by the computer) will be correct. Unfortunately there is an extra step needed to add a doubles team to an event which I haven't explained to everyone. So a couple of control desk staff are bogged down trying to fix the doubles.

At 1:30 p.m. the singles are supposed to start and there are problems with the draws (of course, there seem to be problems with all the draws). One of the problems is that the round robin match cards have not been filled out correctly by the players. Some of the non-English speaking players listed the players in order of finish in the column labeled "won-lost" and put the numbers "1", "2", "3", "4" in that order in the "place column". These were not caught so the effect is to have the result entered completely incorrectly. Now the people are in the wrong event (championship instead of consolation), since which second stage you advance to depends on where you finish in your group (everyone advances). Around 3:30 p.m. I notice a new staff member being instructed to enter results incorrectly. (Actually it was amazing that he was getting any instruction at all.) The way they were doing it the computer would always advance the first player in the match. So half of the results would be wrong. We discover that most of the results so far have been entered in this way. We have to pull all the elimination matches so far and reenter them. Around 4:00 p.m. we close down (i.e., the control desk doesn't send any more matches out) so we can straighten this out.

This would be bad enough, but the players make it worse by finding their opponents on their own and playing their matches without a match card. They just write their names and scores on a piece of paper and hand it in. In order to record the result we have to figure out which event the match is for and where in the event the match is. (The size of the draw sheets is an added problem. Many players told me they weren't in an event when they actually were, but they just hadn't found their name. With several hundred players in an event and the names listed in random order, this is understandable. But coupled with the fact that due to the poor quality of the data there were many people missing, this created an extra strain.) As one control desk person said, "We sometimes can't even tell their sex." (Knowing the sex eliminates half the events.) Actually they could have asked the computer what event the player was in, but they probably didn't know how to do that.

One of the referees is being helpful (yes, I'm being sarcastic). Here is what happened. On Friday (June 8) one of the top Canadian veterans misses his singles round robin. He went to the arena instead of the convention center. Since we didn't have the arena until Monday (June 11) this is a little hard to understand. By the time he figures out he should be at the convention center, he is defaulted. The referee asks if we can advance him into the championship bracket anyway. Well we don't mind, but Hans points out reasonably that we should advance him into the consolation. Then the referee finds three players from Lithuania who have also been defaulted. So he has the idea that he can make a group of four and they can play their qualifying round robin. So he asks

one of the tournament directors and he asks Hans and they say it is fine. So he writes out a match card by hand and sends them out to play. But he never tells anyone involved with operations what he is doing. The players hand in the match card and the control desk has no idea where it came from. Albert spends half an hour taking care of it and then I almost spend another half hour because the person Albert gives the match card to puts it in the problem pile instead of the completed pile.

Meanwhile I've promised Hans that I would give him the draws for the next stage of the doubles by 5:00 p.m., no make that 9:00 p.m., well, I'll leave the rest for him where he can look at them in the morning. I should point out that making draws was difficult. I had to shut down the control desk computers for about half an hour to make draws. At first Hans asked me to make the draws for each event as the groups for that event finished. I said I'd rather do them all at once, but to keep Hans happy I try to do them in bunches. This is a mistake, since it ended up taking several times as long. It turned out that 3:00 a.m. was the best time to make draws since it was very quiet once the security guards locked the building (except for the guy from England who tried to break down the doors one night while threatening to report us to the queen).

By this time I was saying that someone should point out Surbek to me. I still haven't seen him.

After Saturday we said that things had to run more smoothly, because there was no way they could get worse. Sunday was definitely worse. I get woken up at 8:45 a.m. because the computers don't come up the way they should. Turns out I forgot to erase a file at 3:00 a.m. (If you don't understand what that means, it means that because I forgot to do something that takes only 5 seconds, I get a wake up call.) Eventually we simply left the computers on all the time. (This way I didn't have to teach anyone how to turn them on and since I was usually in there until 3:00 a.m. they were only being turned off for a few hours anyway.) Since I am up I wander over by about 9:45 a.m. I ask three control desk staff what is going on and am told 1) "There are some problems with the doubles which I'm fixing, other than that we are OK." 2) "Oh, David — we were just having a discussion as to whether we should shut off the computers." 3) "I was just trying to decide if we should delay the schedule." Clearly things are a bit confused. My reply to person #3 is "What time are we scheduled to run to tonight?" We look at the schedule and see a round at 9:30 p.m. This can't be right—I know we should be done around dinner. The schedule should be 9:30 a.m. Turns out this was a round of 30 doubles matches which the computer thought should be at night, but which should really be in the morning. I fix that and all the match cards start to print.

You can get an idea how messed up we were by the fact that the appearance of 30 match cards (involving 120 players) that have been missing for half an hour doesn't help much at all. There are major problems with the doubles draws due to results being entered incorrectly from the groups. We hold the doubles while we check each one. We don't get the last one fixed until 4:00 p.m.

Around 10:00 a.m. someone decides to call a let on all the tables to announce that we are having “computer problems”. This is news to me. (I know we are having problems, but I didn’t know that the computer was having any.) I go out into the lobby to yell at a few people to let off steam. I take over running the computer so I can stop the doubles matches from coming out until they are fixed (not that anyone was really running it before).

The first thing that I am worried about is whether the computer is working properly. Let me explain a little about how it operated. There are two main ways that the computer might fail to print a match card. (I’m referring to bugs — having the wrong time schedule is a different type of problem.) There could be something wrong with the search routines or match cards could be getting lost on the way to the printer. The printer was definitely acting flaky (of the five printers Brother sent us, four died by the end of the tournament — however when we called them they immediately shipped us out new ones so I’m not complaining about our sponsor), but all the match cards seem to be coming out. I spend until around noon making sure that every match card I think should have been printed, the computer also thinks it printed. (Of course, I am trying to keep the tournament going at the same time.) There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong.

I next try to find out what is going on with the front part of the control desk (where they are handing out the clipboards). Except for the doubles we are holding while we check the draw sheets, all the match cards should have been printed. However, we are having trouble getting matches out. I need to know at what rate to feed match cards to the people who are giving out the clipboards. As nearly as I can tell, we seem to be about one hour behind schedule. (I figure this out by looking at what match cards are lying on the desk, since the staff people that I ask have no idea.) So, at 1:00 p.m. I tell them that I will run 1 hour behind them (meaning I’ll feed them match cards according to the schedule, but at a 1 hour delay). At 2:00 p.m. I realize that I am feeding them faster than they can keep up, so I tell them I’ll run 2 hours behind. At 3:00 p.m. I tell them I’ll run 3 hours behind. At 4:00 p.m. I go to 4 hours behind. The person who is putting match cards on clipboards hands me back about a hundred match cards and tells me to hold onto them. We seem to have almost stopped.

I’m not sure what to do. Someone counted the number of people on the control desk. There were 18 people up there. Not only were all the shifts up there, but so were all sorts of other people (umpires, other staff, tournament directors, wives). We (here “we” means two of us who went out into the lobby to discuss what was going on) decide we have to shut down to get “organized”. It takes me 30 minutes to shut the desk. (By “shut” I mean get the staff to stop talking to players and to stop handing out matches.) I also try to get rid of most of the people who are milling about on the desk trying to help, but actually causing confusion. There isn’t room for 18 people to stand up there let alone get any work done. I do a lousy job getting rid of people. (After this I was coached on how to kick people off: “You’ve been working very hard; you

look tired; why don't you take a break and come back around 8:00 p.m.? You're welcome.") No one I tell to leave actually leaves. Nor do they stop trying to hand out matches. Eventually somehow we shut down. I separate the clipboards into three stations and assign two people to each station. We reopen and almost immediately we are only two hours behind. We hold to that for the rest of the day.

In case you missed the point, my conclusion is that we weren't having computer problems. Rather we were having serious organizational-training-staffing problems. I will readily admit that the fact that we were using computers made organization more critical and partially determined which organizations would work. A feature of computers is that they create the opportunity for disaster.

We hold a staff meeting for anyone involved with the control desk at 9:00 p.m. Sunday (June 10). The meeting is more of an argument. I make an attempt to give people specific jobs (although at the time it was not entirely clear to me what the problem or solution was). The plan is that on Tuesday (June 12) Albert would supervise the arena control desk while Gordon and I would supervise the convention center control desk and run the computers. My informants tell me that after some of us left the meeting, the remaining staff spent a while telling each other that if only they were left alone, then everything would be fine.

Monday (June 11) we set up the arena. The opening ceremonies are fine, but the party is a disaster. We give 100 Swedes including Hans refunds for the party. (When I say the party is a disaster I mean from our point of view. The party should make money for the tourney; clearly it is hard to make money by giving refunds. Of course the 100 Swedes probably have their own description of the party.)

Did Hans mess up the Veterans? Well he didn't help, but we would have had many of the same problems even if we had played the doubles on Friday (June 8) (assuming we could have gotten them ready in time). However, for the U.S. Open a lot more of the trouble was due to the time schedule change.

Tuesday morning (June 12) I'm not feeling very well since I was up literally all night redoing the time schedule. Dennis and Linda are trying to run the cashier and problem desk themselves. Dennis says he needs help, so I tell him to go pull Albert out of the arena. Gordon shows up at 10:00 a.m., and I go back to the hotel to take a shower. When I come back at 11:00 a.m., both Gordon and Albert are at the problem desk. I end up helping them. We spend most of the day there. The arena doesn't really need supervising (there are only twelve tables and lots of staff). The convention center control desk is running fine because according to the new schedule there are virtually no matches to play until 5:00 p.m. In the evening they fall way behind. I stay away from the control desk so I don't know the details. We go out to eat at Burke's and I fall asleep in the restaurant.

In case you missed the point, it was clear to me that the control desk needed help, but the three people who were the logical (and only) choices to help ended up at the problem desk (where they were also needed) instead of at the control

desk. The reason that the problem desk needed so many people was that all the U.S. Open players were arriving and there were problems with their entries since the data was so bad. (Actually I always knew the problem desk was going to be understaffed.)

Sometime around here (I can't remember exactly when) I'm at the problem desk and Gordon tells me to turn around because Surbek is here and needs me to change his draw. When I said I wanted to see him, I really meant I would like to see him play.

Wednesday (June 13) I get a wake up call at 10:45 a.m. asking me if data typed into the convention center computer will magically appear in the arena computer. I suggest that I be given a schedule for the arena so I can ensure that the necessary data gets moved. I'll leave you to figure out the point of this story.

The plan had been to make the draws each evening for the next day and post them. One reason was that the data was so bad we wanted the players to register and tell us what was wrong before we made the draw. It was much easier to fix problems before the draw was made. However, this isn't working. One reason is that it is too difficult for me to make the draws at 7:00 p.m. when I had planned (the control desk needed the computers to stay up). Another reason is every time we fix a problem we cause a new one. For example, doubles is a disaster. If we add a team, then a team that thought they had a bye no longer does. If we change a partner, then how do we tell the old partner that he is now unpaired? Gordon and I decide that we are closing the problem desk. Our attempts to fix problems are just making the problems worse (remember the cat in the hat?) and there are other things we need to do. If we've made a mistake, then we will give a refund. Wednesday (June 13) night I make all the remaining draws and leave a note that they should all be posted along with a sign that they are final.

Thursday (June 14) is the day we didn't go to the aquarium. (I'll explain this.) Gordon shows up Thursday morning and can't find the draws because the control desk took them all. Eventually we find them. One of the staff people asks Dennis and me to leave the control desk since we are bothering him by trying to help a player. This staff person is sitting there getting the poor computer all confused, but I don't feel up to explaining to him what he is doing wrong. I go over to the arena. I run into Albert and Gordon around 2:00 p.m., and we go out looking for lunch. Around 3:30 p.m. we decide to go to the aquarium since we've never been there. Albert hasn't received his expense money yet (in case you are wondering, all we got for all this work was expenses) so we go to the back of the convention center to room 202 where the treasurer hangs out. As we are walking towards the convention center we see Dennis. He tells us that the control desk needs us. After 10 minutes of arguing I agree to go down there.

When I arrive, I tell the shift leader that if I am going to be there then we have to do things my way. I'm told that everything is fine, but they need someone

to run the computer since the staff person (the one who spent all morning confusing the computer) left and he is the only one who knows how to run the computer. It is 4:00 p.m. I take a look around and see a whole bunch of 12:30 p.m. match cards lying on the desk. It takes me 15 minutes to shut the desk and kick people off. The new technique for asking people to leave works much better. About half the people I ask to leave do leave. I try to assign two people to each of the three clipboard stations. I have them pull out the second set of clipboards (“double clipboards”). And I announce over the public address that we are now officially two hours behind and will stay two hours behind for the rest of the day.

This works fairly well. The worst part was I ended up giving out the clipboards at one of the three stations. This was an impossible job. We manage to hold to two hours behind until about 10:00 p.m. when we start to slip by a half hour or so. The worst problem was that the men’s doubles was scheduled for 4:00 p.m. Add two hours and you get 6:00 p.m. which is when the men’s singles was supposed to play in the arena. There isn’t anything to do except hold the doubles until after the singles. The mixed doubles also ended up delayed. Both doubles were played very late.

Why was it an “impossible job” to hand out clipboards? Well everything was conspiring to make it difficult. First the computer was thoroughly confused. The computer only knows what it is told. However, match cards were being lost, matches were played without match cards, and match cards were printed hours or days before the match was actually played. The computer was trying to keep track of who was playing, but the staff had spent a week getting it confused, so it had no idea. But it didn’t know that it had no idea and there was no way to tell it to stop trying. One effect was that it wouldn’t print all the match cards. (As I write this, the tournament has been over for more than a month, but the computer thinks there are still 22 matches playing.)

The U.S. Open also has many features that make it inherently difficult. Many of the players don’t speak English. Since we were behind and the schedule was all messed up, we were using the public address system to page players. This didn’t work. None of the Asian players recognize their names when English-speaking people say them. I had a lot of trouble with two Japanese girls who apparently couldn’t recognize their own names written on the match card in English. (We anticipated this problem, which is why we assigned tables for every match, but we didn’t make good use of our solution.)

Here is a true story. A player came up and handed me a clipboard with a single elimination match card. He said that he had waited at the table for an hour. (I’m already confused, since I don’t understand why we would give out a single elimination match card without both players having shown up.) Since his opponent didn’t show up he figures he won by default. So he decided to go ahead and play the person he is scheduled to play in the next round (i.e., since he won by default, he advances). He won that match and he has written the person’s name and the scores on the bottom of this match card. We go to

put the default in the computer, but the computer says it already has a result for that match. So we look through the pile of completed match cards and find another match card for the same match. This one shows the opponent as winning by default. I page him. He shows up right away (only time the whole tournament someone I paged showed up) and I send them out to play. We decide that if the first guy wins, then we will count his extra match.

While this is going on Gordon walks over holding two round robin match cards. Both are for the same match. One of them shows only one player as showing up and hence winning by default. The other shows the other three players having all played each other and defaulting the first player.

From discussions with control desk staff after the tournament, I believe that the following was an all too common scenario. A staff person would come up to the computer holding a draw sheet and ask where the match card for a certain match was. The computer would reply that it was already printed. The staff person would say that he couldn't find it and tell the computer to print a new one. I really don't know how we can run a tournament where we print two match cards for every match and give one to each of the two players. (Presumably it is the computer's fault although I don't see why.)

Another true story. A player comes up to registration and says he wants a refund. By this time we've been giving refunds rather than fix problems. But we ask him why. He says because there was only one other player in his group who showed up. He claims that we guaranteed four players. We say we have no control over whether the other players show up. He threatens to sue us. He wants Dennis to sign a piece of paper saying that we wouldn't give him a refund. Dennis says, "Sure". He asks to borrow a pencil. Dennis tells him to find his own pencil. He says we aren't being very nice. Dennis points out that he is threatening to sue us.

Friday (June 15) we run smoothly. I and my assistants spend the day getting the junior tournament set up. In case you don't know, the TOC was actually three tournaments: the Veterans World Championships, the U.S. Open, and the International Junior. I'd sort of been hoping that if I ignored the Junior, it would go away. What with jury meetings and arguments about the draws and making sure everyone was in and the fact that I hadn't made up a time schedule for it when I'd done the others (nor when I'd redone the others), we didn't get the draw and time schedule done until 3:00 a.m.

Friday (June 15) around 6:00 p.m. a player comes up to registration and says he wants to register. I don't understand this. "Haven't you already registered?" "No." "Are you in the tournament?" "No." "Did you send in an entry?" "No." "Then you can't get in. The deadline was two months ago." At this he pulls out a clipboard. Apparently he came over earlier when we were at the jury meeting. Since we weren't there he went to the control desk. They asked him what his rating was. He said he was around 1700. So the control desk took one of the 1700 round robins that was just going out and had only three people in it and wrote his name as the fourth. He is now showing me the completed

match card. Apparently he won the group. He would now like to get into the tournament. Gordon goes to the control desk to yell at them. Their defense is "We're flexible." (No, I didn't put him in.)

Saturday (June 16) I wander over about 10:00 a.m. and do a few things, such as replace the control desk's laser printer which has just died. Two people whom I won't name are sitting there completely redoing the Junior draws that had already been approved by all the coaches and which Gordon and I had stayed up until 3:00 a.m. to do. ("Of course you can't play your doubles partner until the finals.") I go over to the arena. This is my fifteenth day in Baltimore and I haven't really seen anyone play yet. I see the complete doubles final and the singles semis. (Why was the doubles final on table 2?) The final is scheduled for 8:00 p.m. At 7:50 p.m. I am told that we have to move all the computers out of registration by 9:00 p.m. because the convention center is going to break that area down. Idiots that we are, Gordon and I go over to the convention center and spend an hour moving hardware. We watch the first game and a half of the final on the closed circuit TV while carrying computers. When we get back to the arena we kick two people out of our court-side seats.

Oh, I should discuss the computers. First it should be obvious that you can't run a tournament of this size without computers. How would you do the draws? When would you do the draws? Who would do the draws? Similar questions for time schedules, table assignments, etc. Where would you get all the extra staff you would need? (We were understaffed as it was.)

Did the computers do their job? I think so. They did what I expected them to do. Then why was the control desk staff so hostile? The reason is that the computer changed the flow of information. When there was a problem (and at this tournament, just calling a match qualified as a problem) the staff fell back on the way they would solve the problem at their local one-star tournament. They would look at the draw sheet. Unfortunately the computer was not designed (and could not reasonably be designed) to handle every problem by printing a draw sheet. At the worst this meant that each match required a new draw sheet. Since a draw sheet took at least a minute (usually more) to print, this limited us to playing 30 matches every half hour which would not keep the tables even half full.

The point is that there was no good reason to be printing so many draw sheets. The computer was providing the necessary information in a different way, but this information was not only being ignored, it was being scrambled so that it was incorrect. Only one control desk staff person ever asked me how to use the computer.

Did we try to explain how the computer worked? Yes, but I didn't realize until the TOC how miserably we failed. One of the problems is that most people don't realize when they don't understand something. Next time I'll give a quiz. How did we train people? Well, we've used the computers at the last Eastern, U.S. Open, North American Championships, and U.S. Nationals. Many of the staff worked at these tournaments. In fact we intentionally had double the staff

we needed at the U.S. Nationals in Berkeley because I considered it a training session. Unfortunately it didn't work. Berkeley was too easy, especially with 5 on a shift, so you could run the desk any way you wanted. They didn't really learn how to use the computer. We also did a training session as part of one of the tournament director's meetings we had in Colorado Springs. And I gave copies of the software to anyone who asked so they could try it. And of course we tried to do training at the TOC. In retrospect, my idea of how to do training was ridiculous. If I did it again I would do it completely differently.

Do we really need the computer at the control desk? After all, we didn't have one there two years ago. There is the obvious benefit that it provides printed draw sheets and match cards. But one of the most important reason to have a computer at the control desk is it makes it possible to manage delays and to default players promptly. Of course, we didn't do this at the TOC, but it wasn't the computer's fault. To understand why we need a computer to do this, think about how you would do the following by hand. Make sure that a player has registered in order to ensure he has paid before playing. Decide if a player should be defaulted because he hasn't registered. Decide if a player is playing another match or should be defaulted. The reason to do these things is they are important for the smooth running of the tournament. It is unfair (to the opponent) to take an hour to default someone because you are unsure whether he is playing. (This occurred at the Open two years ago.) Besides it messes up the schedule. (Defaults should take less time than matches not more!)

I printed out all the draw sheets when I got home. It was at least a two inch stack of paper. Imagine trying to shuffle all that paper at the tournament. Imagine writing the results for thousand of matches on draw sheets by hand.

Why didn't we use the software that was used to run the U.S. Open in 1988? Well those tournaments weren't really run by computer. It was more like the computer did the printing. Dan and Patti would spend a month full time preparing. By doing an exceptionally good job with the pre-tournament data they could minimize the changes necessary at the tournament. They just didn't allow any changes during the tournament. If we had used that software we would have been in big trouble. Besides it would have needed major modifications to handle the veterans format and the number of players and a million minor things. Also we wanted the control desk to know if a player had registered and we wanted to be able to print completed draw sheets when the tournament was done. (We were supposed to give each player in the veterans a copy of the completed draws, although we didn't.) Using the old software really wasn't an option.

Well, I've said enough, but there are a lot more stories I could tell. Next time you go to the Detroit Teams ask Bob Allshouse to tell you about Tony.

I want to thank two people who were exceptional and did much more than was expected of them. The first week Margaret ran the tournament. She didn't yell at a single player. The second week Gordon ran the tournament. This wasn't his job. He actually brought his golf clubs.

Oh, the answer to the quiz. Jorgen Persson is listed as “Toreen Persson”. Four out of six letters are correct in his first name.

Epilogue: The following is a letter that I sent to Margaret, Gordon, Albert, and Dennis (the Problem Desk Staff) on November 6, 1990. It seems an apt postscript to the preceding article.

Well, the TOC is becoming a distant (though painful) memory, so I thought as a suitable wrap up I would reveal how close we came to a meltdown. I had thought that the closest brush was when the network cards wouldn't work in the 386 machines. However, I have recently discovered the cause of the problems I had with the doubles file. This is also the cause of the problem that Margaret had just before the U.S. Nationals and of some of the gremlins we had kicking around at the TOC.

It seems that the people who wrote the English version of the manual for the database library I am using didn't know that a certain constant named MaxHeight had to be set to at least 4. I had set it to 3 since the manual gave the impression that this was sufficient for 200,000 records. Actually 3 doesn't work for two reasons. First the actual worst case capacity is only 2047 records (we had 3102 at the TOC), and second the library needs MaxHeight to be 4 for various internal operations.

In other words we were overwriting parts of memory. It was just luck that we didn't trash anything vital.

Addendum, December 20, 2015.

The preceding article, without the epilogue, was published in Table Tennis Topics (the USATT magazine) a few months after the tournament. For some reason, Tim Boggan, the editor, decided to print it in very narrow columns, one on the left and one on the right of each page, with the article thus running over many pages and being rather hard to read.

Yvonne Kronlage, one of the two tournament directors was overall in charge of handling the entry forms and registration before the tournament. Richard McAfee moved to Baltimore a year or so before the tournament so he could work on the local preparations full time. They hired someone whose name I've forgotten to do the data entry. Amazingly, the person they hired was even more incompetent than they were, and besides being very sloppy and slow, knew nothing of table tennis. Most of the discussions I had with Yvonne in the year leading up to the tournament were when she wanted me to add some feature to the software to help her track the extracurricular activities that players could sign up for (the disastrous party, sightseeing tour of Washington, D.C., a boat trip). Yvonne and Richard seem blissfully unaware of how much they are to

blame for the problems. Both Yvonne and Richard are in the USATT Hall of Fame.

It was quite a shock to me that so many of the control desk staff refused to learn how to properly run the control desk and persisted in running it like it was one of their local tournaments with fifty players all of whom they knew by sight. Donna Sakai, one of the shift leaders, deserves special mention in this regard, but there were many others. She also seems blissfully unaware of how much blame she deserves. For several years after the 1990 TOC, she ran the control desk at the U.S. Open and U.S. Nationals, of course without having a computer at the control desk. She is also in the USATT Hall of Fame. Other control desk staff who did their share of damage were Rich Livingston and Lori Berenson.

The person who was mainly responsible for entering the Veterans results wrong on Saturday (always advancing the first player) had the decency to apologize for his mistake. I don't understand how he got the idea he should enter them that way. Ironically, he had been recommended to us as someone who was more technically savvy and computer literate.

The whole idea of the Tournaments of Champions was a mistake. The organizers (I wasn't involved at this point) thought the tournaments would reinforce each other. That is, people would enter the World Veterans Championships and stay to play in the U.S. Open, or vice versa. But, few players wanted to play that much or stay for that long. As you can see from the numbers, there were about 250 player who played in both (almost everyone who played in the Junior Championships also played in the Open). They were expecting five thousand players. They had the hotels put aside enough rooms for that many players. The cheaper hotels filled up and the more expensive ones were empty. The latter hotels were not happy.

The TOC had a budget of \$1,000,000, but the revenue was only \$700,000. The tournament treasurer made up the difference out of his own pocket. After the tournament, he got all the tables, which he slowly sold off. He probably got several hundred dollars for each, not nearly enough to cover what he contributed.

One of the groups that was behind the tournament was the Maryland State Games. They were supposed to help with promotion and finding sponsors. I think they also provided some money, but I don't know how much. Their interest in running a table tennis tournament was to demonstrate they could handle a large, international event so that they could bid on the Olympics. The tournament never did find significant sponsorship (hardly suprising). At one point in the year before the tournament, there was a discussion at one of the meetings about getting the Baltimore Arena. The original plan had been to only use the convention center. But, the arena would provide a much nicer venue for the championship events. Everyone wanted to get the arena, but the question was how to pay for it. I think it was going to cost around \$70,000. The Maryland State Games people said they could come up with part of the money by using

their budget for providing recreation for seniors. They said that they would bus the seniors in to watch the tournament. This sounded a little fishy to me, but it wasn't my department. Soon after the tournament, everyone in the Maryland State Games organization was either fired, indicted, or sent to jail, and not because of the table tennis tournament.