

# TOP SPIN

A Film by Sara Newens & Mina T. Son

Digital (DCP & BluRay) / Documentary / 81 min / 2014 / English & Mandarin w/ English Subtitles



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## **Synopsis:**

Inside a cramped gym tucked behind a California strip mall, the clacking sounds of hollow plastic balls whirling at 80 mph are punctuated by exclamations of victory and bitter cries of defeat. Welcome to the hidden world of competitive ping pong. Three fiercely committed teenagers battle their way through the world of elite table tennis. With devoted parents by their side, they have traded normal teenage life for a chance to represent their country on the world's biggest athletic stage: the Olympics.

*Top Spin* reveals how Ariel, Michael, and Lily balance rivalry, teenage awkwardness and friendships as every match impacts their fledgling confidence. Regularly juggling six-hour training sessions, overseas tournaments, and schoolwork, they inevitably sacrifice the typical teenage rites of passage. An inside look at offbeat sport, *Top Spin* turns one of America's favorite pastimes on its head and reveals a coming-of-age story where success and failure come down to mere millimeters.

## **Directors' Statement:**

Our project began in the winter of 2010 when we directed an award-winning short film about junior table tennis champion Ariel Hsing while attending Stanford University's M.F.A. Documentary Film and Video Program. The short went on to screen at festivals all over the world. We quickly realized there was a much deeper story to tell around the approaching 2012 Olympic Games. More importantly, we recognized a growing audience for the film given the tremendous response to the short.

Everybody knows ping pong: the game you played in your parents' basement or friend's rec room. But very few people are familiar with table tennis: the extremely competitive Olympic sport where the difference between winning and losing can come down to mere millimeters. According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, there are 19 million recreational table tennis players in the U.S. The sport seems to be gaining even more momentum with ping pong bars sprouting up in major cities and celebrities and moguls being some of its biggest fans. Yet amidst the immense popularity of the sport throughout the world and even the unique role it has played in U.S. politics, table tennis is one of the most under-appreciated sports in the country. In fact, there are only 9,000 registered tournament players in the country compared to the staggering statistic of recreational participants.

While making this film, we have grown a deep admiration for not just our subjects but also for the table tennis community as a whole. Neither of us are elite athletes, but we were once unsure teenagers simply trying to figure out ourselves as well as the world in which we lived. Table tennis enthusiasts imbue a sense of passion and spirit that could never be fueled by money or power, much like documentary filmmakers. With this being our first feature-length documentary, we have taken on the dogged, indomitable spirit of a table tennis player – never taking no for an answer and ultimately believing that hard work will reward us in the end.

## **Subjects:**

### **Ariel Hsing**

Ariel Hsing has aspirations to be the best table tennis player in the world and she is off to a great start. At 16, she is already a two-time U.S. Women's Table Tennis Champion. A San Jose native, Ariel wakes up every morning at 7am to practice serves before going to class. Training can last up to 6 hours a day at various clubs around the Bay Area. Along with her parents, Ariel has devoted her entire life around table tennis, with the hope of one day becoming an Olympian.

### **Michael Landers**

In 2009, 17-year-old Michael Landers became the youngest U.S. Men's Table Tennis Champion at the ripe age of 15. Hailing from Long Island, New York, Michael spends summers training in central China but most of the time you can find him playing at SPiN, a ping pong social club in Manhattan. At such a young age, Michael has learned the meaning of sacrifice, having given up his last year of high school for what may be his only chance at making it to the 2012 London Olympics.

### **Lily Zhang**

Fifteen-year-old Lily Zhang was previously ranked second in the world in her age group, a first for any American-born table tennis player. Born and raised in Palo Alto, Lily got her start at the age of 7 when she and her family played table tennis in the laundry room of the Stanford faculty apartments where her father taught math. Her evenings and weekends consist of training and she often misses consecutive days of school due to overseas tournaments. It is her love for the sport and the dream of playing in her first Olympics that keeps her motivated and committed to table tennis, the ultimate underdog sport.

<http://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/film-review-top-spin-1201438047/>

# VARIETY

**The road to the London Olympics is paved with Ping-Pong balls for the three teenage hopefuls in Mina T. Son and Sara Newens' documentary.**

Ronnie Scheib

*The road to the Olympics is paved with Ping-Pong balls for three teen hopefuls in “Top Spin,” Mina T. Son and Sara Newens’ quick-moving, kinetically edited sports documentary. At this level of play, speed and coordination prove paramount — qualities that are reflected in co-helmer/editor Newens’ choice of scenes, which concisely capture aspects of her subjects’ personalities and training at progressive stages in the countdown to the Olympic trials. The film doesn’t so much avoid cliches as brush off any sentimental excess, briskly maintaining narrative flow. Given the pic’s agreeable chronicling of high-level excellence in an under-documented sport, cable could give “Top Spin” a whirl.*

Son and Newens focus on three young Ping-Pongers — California girls Ariel Hsing, 16, and Lily Zhang, 15, respectively Nos. 1 and 2 in the national rankings, and Long Islander Michael Landers, 17, who at 15 became the youngest-ever American male champion. Their brand of table tennis bears little resemblance to the family rec-room variety: Play attains such a fast and furious pitch that viewers might be tempted to check out non-combatants in the background to verify that the action isn’t artificially sped up.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that athletes must undergo hours of daily intensive physical training to navigate the table with the requisite agility. Hsing’s father commits himself fully and professionally to be her coach, while Zhang relies on non-family trainers. The girls are both friends and rivals, though Hsing consistently triumphs in their head-to-heads. Neither visibly experiences any difficulties in reconciling their extended tournament-related absences and marathon practice hours with keeping up at school or maintaining ties with classmates, most of whom have little concept of the girls’ double lives. Hsing’s transition from high school to college transpires without a hitch.

For Landers, however, choices involve more stress. He takes time off before college, traveling first to China, where the isolation from friends and family and the exhaustive nature of the training regimen take their toll, then to New York, where he enjoys celebrity status at the Ping-Pong game room/bar Spin. Since, to quote an American-Asian colleague, he is “young, Caucasian and good,” this fame soon expands to include magazine spreads, TV appearances and his photo appearing on a Kellogg’s Cornflakes box. His parents are leery of his decision to

postpone college but careful to stress that they feel it necessary that he pursue his dream — even though making the U.S. Olympic team would be highly unlikely to result in a medal (the US ranks 45th) or translate into a career.

Meanwhile, neither Hsing's nor Zhang's Chinese-born parents harbor any such reservations about their daughters' wholehearted immersion in the sport. The girls' sportsmanship attracts the notice of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, seen clowning around with giant paddles to compete with them, but such illustrious contacts bear no hint of serious networking.

The filmmakers contrast the American players' marginality with the game's omnipresence and prestige in China, where, as location photography reveals, parks and public spaces virtually teem with rectangular tables in wood, stone and marble — more than explaining the country's hegemony in the sport.

The U.S. trials, followed by the North American trials, increasingly structure the film — but not all the featured kids make it to the Olympics. Son and Newens build suspense not from point to point within individual games, but by opposing different styles of play (Hsing and Zhang, with their fast-paced volleys, vs. the “choppers,” who systematically “chop” away at opponents' rhythms). Highlighting virtuoso bursts of energy and edge-clipping shots that cinch a game, “Top Spin” goes a long way toward building a mystique around the little table at the center of all those blink-of-an-eye flurries

## **Crew Bios:**

### **Mina T. Son, Director/Producer**

Mina T. Son is a Los Angeles-based Korean American filmmaker whose films have screened at film festivals and museums including the National Gallery of Art, Margaret Mead, Traverse City, Mill Valley, and Cinequest. A two-time Student Academy Award Regional Finalist, Mina has been awarded fellowships and funding from Independent Television Service, Stanford Institute for Creativity and the Arts, Film Independent, PBS/CPB Producers Academy, the Japan U.S. Friendship Commission, and Center for Cultural Innovation. Mina holds an M.F.A. in Documentary Film from Stanford University and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles.

### **Sara Newens, Director/Editor**

Sara Newens is a documentary filmmaker and editor who has worked in film and television for over a decade, including seven years at CBS News in New York City. Her films have screened at numerous festivals, including Sarasota, Traverse City, Starz Denver, Big Sky and Rooftop Films. She is the recipient of a Princess Grace Foundation Award, CINE Golden Eagle Award, and a Student Academy Award Regional Finalist. Currently, she is a San Francisco-based producer/editor for clients that include Facebook, PG&E, Stanford University School of Medicine, and various non-profits. She is a graduate of the M.F.A. Documentary Film Program at Stanford University, and received a B.S. in Mass Communication from Miami University of Ohio.

### **Jonathan Bricklin, Executive Producer**

Jonathan Bricklin did not invent the game of ping-pong, although he does sometimes take credit for it, having co-founded a chain of intergalactic ping-pong social clubs called SPiN. When not ping-ponging Jonathan writes books and makes documentary films. He lives in Manhattan, has no children, pets or plants.

### **Franck Raharinosy, Executive Producer**

Franck Raharinosy Franck is an actor, writer, producer, ping pong provocateur and co-founder of SPiN, a chain of ping pong social clubs. He lives in New York City.