

U.S. OPEN AND SHUT: SHANE MAKES HIS CASE

With his streak in Chesapeake, Van Boening stakes his claim as America's best.

Story and photos by Mason King

SHANE VAN Boening would not let go of his trophy. As ungainly as it was — a plaque in the shape of the United States with a gilded pool-player figurine at front — the spindly Van Boening cradled it like a baby during the ride to the after-party for the U.S. Open 9-Ball Championships. He held onto it during the late-night victory fete. Around 4 a.m., still buzzed but bushed from the biggest day of his pool career, Van Boening boarded a Continental Express jet at Norfolk International Airport with the trophy as a carry-on. As the jet lofted him on his trip back home to South Dakota, he fell asleep with the plaque in his lap.

It's safe to say that he bonded with his new hardware. But 24-year-old Van Boening was so cool, so controlled, so self-possessed in his star-making performance at the 32nd annual U.S. Open that one otherwise might not know how he felt about the title.

He's a hard kid to read. For seven days — Oct. 14-20 at the Chesapeake Conference Center in Chesapeake, Va. — Van Boening tramped through the brackets with the dispassionate demeanor of an IRS auditor. Although little more than a rookie on the men's pro circuit, he approached the table with a measured pace, loose limbs and been-there-done-that poise. When he wasn't dispatching opponents, he practiced obsessively on the arena's starkly lit TV table. Rack after

rack after rack, he honed the speed on his crafty cut break and noted the temper of the rails. Not until the last rack of the championship final against reigning world 9-ball champion Ronnie Alcano did a half-smile begin to bend his typically static expression.

How did he keep so calm in crunch time? "I don't know how I do it," he said



Win span: Van Boening went undefeated over 9 matches.

upon some reflection. "I don't know what to say."

If he sounds surprised that he won, he wasn't. Van Boening may be soft-spoken, but he's supremely confident. And he arrived in Chesapeake as something of a favorite, after a busy spring earning his first major title and two second-place

finishes in elite events. Everybody knew the kid was good. The U.S. Open would take his full measure.

The tale of the tape: Van Boening was easily the best player in the 233-man field, running undefeated over nine matches, including two against the world champion.

"I just tried my best," said Van Boening after his 13-10 title-clinching victory over Alcano.

"He's a man of few words," said Open impresario Barry Behrman, who ferried Van Boening to the after-party in his 2007 Corvette, and later to the airport.

"He's just so focused," Behrman said. "He's a determined young man who can only get better, and will get better without a doubt. ... This kid is 24, and he'll win the U.S. Open several more times, I'm predicting. He's just solid."

RONNIE ALCANO was the perfect opponent for Van Boening in the final, beyond the fact that beating the world champ would be the ultimate affirmation of his U.S. Open title.

Exceedingly lanky, both Alcano and Van Boening look like upside-down exclamation points, and, in a bit of metaphorical irony, neither is known for being particularly gabby.

Alcano let his cue do the talking. On the tight Diamond tournament tables and under humid conditions that made



No pressure: Van Boening kept his cool in the spotlight.

the rails extra grabby, the native Filipino felt right at home. He quickly found a comfortable speed and applied the carefully controlled stroke that won him the 2006 World Pool Championship.

"I hope to win [the Open]," Alcano said in his halting English. "I am playing better now than last year."

That wasn't good news for his countrymen. Alcano was mired amid a scrum of Filipino players bunched into one of the tournament's four 64-player brackets. Six of the country's legitimate threats found themselves on a collision course in the bracket's quarterfinals — Alcano vs. Efren Reyes, Jose Parica vs. Francisco Bustamante, and Lee Van Cortez vs. Warren Kiamco.

Filipinos have dominated the Open in recent years, placing three players in the 2005 final four, and Rodolfo Luat in the

2006 final with winner John Schmidt. No doubt, many in this year's field would chuckle over the Pinoy contingent's fate, through seeding and a blind draw.

Alcano, 35, continued to build his reputation against his idol Reyes, catapulting from a 7-6 deficit to an 11-7 victory on the TV table, lit for live Internet broadcast over Billiard Club Network. As Alcano's game hit a new gear, Reyes downshifted, bobbling balls and failing to convert safeties in key situations. Afterward, a despondent Reyes slumped in a chair in the conference center's



Scratch that: Alcano faltered in the final against Van Boening.

banquet room, his eyes half open, dreading his trip to the losers' bracket.

Staying on the winners' side was more crucial than usual at this year's Open. One loss, and you could find yourself playing in the purgatory of 4 a.m.

Behrman scheduled the week-long Open this year so that it would end on a Saturday night, giving players and spectators a weekend travel day. However, he lined up the players' meeting for the previous Sunday afternoon, leaving time for only two rounds of matches that day. In the end, harried tournament director Scott Smith would have to make up four rounds over the course of the week.

After a 9 a.m. round proved hugely unpopular, Smith tacked 12:30 a.m. rounds onto the Thursday and Friday schedules. These losers-bracket rounds inevitably went long, and a few matches extended to 4 a.m. and beyond.

Reyes was joined on the losers' side by Parica and Kiamco, both victims of Alcano. That set up a winners-side semifinal between Alcano and Van Boening, who hadn't yet been seriously challenged.

Van Boening began his campaign with an 11-5 win over tough Texan Sylver Ochoa, and kept on marching with victories over Chad Pike, 11-1; Sparky Ferrell, 11-8; Marcus Chamat, 11-3; Ronnie Wiseman, 11-8; and Corey Deuel, 11-8.

Many viewed the Alcano match as a gut-check for Van Boening, and he showed plenty of intestinal fortitude. He took an 8-3 lead, nailing sporty combinations and precise banks. Alcano never had a chance to find his rhythm, and botched a 3 ball at 9-4. Van Boening mopped up the table and then broke and ran out to take the match, 11-4.

"I felt very confident in myself," he said after a near-flawless performance and a rare standing ovation from the crowd. "I'm very calm, and that is what it's all about."

NOT MANY were surprised to see Alcano and Van Boening late in the winners' bracket, but one name consistently provoked double-takes: Japanese straight-pool specialist Tomoko Mekari.

Ranked 10th on the national 9-ball tour in his country, 38-year-old Mekari benefited from a bracket at the U.S. Open packed with regional aces and passed-their-prime contenders. Tommy Kennedy, the 1992 Open champion, gave Mekari a fight before losing, 11-10, and a frisky Allen Hopkins, a titlist in 1977 and 1981, finally bowed at 11-7.

Mekari then ran into red-hot Louis Ulrich, a 33-year-old real estate agent and part-time pool player who was all but unknown until a surprising run in August at the Turning Stone Classic, ending in a second-place finish.

Unlike Mekari, Ulrich had survived challenges from serious threats. He dispatched 2004 Open champion Jeremy Jones, 11-5, and 2005 winner Alex Pagulayan, 11-7. An 11-1 pasting of Tony Robles set up the match with Mekari.

"I'm playing the best I can, but things keep going my way," said Ulrich, some-



Ulrich ultimately succumbed to a brutal late-night schedule.

what stunned by his success. "If they keep going that way, who knows what will happen?"

Ulrich took a 9-4 lead against Mekari, who struggled with the balky table. Mekari then took a timeout, and the players traded roles for the rest of the match.

"The timeout was huge," Mekari said. "It gave me time to collect myself. My opponent made mistakes, and I capitalized on them. And then he lost momentum." Mekari won, 11-9.

In his winners-side semifinal, Mekari matched up against 2002 Open champion Ralf Souquet, who had been building a head of steam in his bracket. He reached the semifinal with consecutive quality wins against Larry Nevel, 11-10; Johnny Archer, 11-2; and Dennis Orcollo, 11-5.

Souquet, who regularly plays in Japan, knew his opponent better than most. In fact, they displayed similar, methodical

styles. After Souquet traipsed to a 3-0 lead, he found he couldn't keep any distance between him and his deliberative opponent. At 8-8, he broke dry, ceding control of the table to Mekari for the rest of the match. With superlative touch, Mekari weaved in and out of clusters and split the pockets on the longest of cut shots.

Immediately after his 11-8 win, Mekari fielded cell phone text messages from a half-dozen Japanese pro players sending

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congratulations. His performance to that point had far surpassed his previous high finish at the Open, which he guesstimated in the top 32.

"The only thing I'm upset about is that I can't have a beer right now," said Mekari, who makes a practice of not drinking during tournaments.

F VAN Boening wasn't playing, he was practicing. Whenever he noticed that the TV table was open, he would slip over and start racking.

Acclimating himself to the table was one of the key points in his strategy, according to his manager, Chuck Moss.

"We came out here three years ago and watched many of the other players," Moss said. "I noticed that a lot of the top players spend as much time on the TV table as possible, because to duplicate that environment at home is hard to do. So we talked about that: Spend as much time there as you can, because you want to be comfortable with that table."

The lights dried out the TV table, making it roll faster. The temperature in the arena reached at least 80 degrees, Van Boening estimated, and the attention of the cameras and spectators brought another kind of heat.

But by now, Van Boening was used to the spotlight. Unseeded at the Enjoy-Pool.com 9-Ball Championships in May, he streaked to the televised final against Orcollo. There, the Filipino punished his loose safety play and dry breaks, running away with the match, 7-1.

Van Boening won his first major title just eight days later at the Predator 10-Ball World Championship. He finished second to Pagulayan at the World Summit of Pool three weeks later. But he wasn't content to soak in the glory. He embarked on an intense practice regimen for his break and defensive play, hoping to plug any holes in his game.

"He's very dedicated. I can't believe the time he puts in his game," said Moss, a commercial real estate broker and developer in Sioux Falls, S.D., who befriended Van Boening five years ago. In order to afford Van Boening more time to practice, he purchased a poolroom in Sioux Falls and made Van Boening a partner.



Tokyo pose: Mekari was a surprise standout.

"He has keys to the poolhall. I've seen him play until 5 or 6 in the morning, working on his break," Moss said.

Instead of shattering the rack, many top players at the U.S. Open opted for a half-speed cut break, which helped ease balls into the pockets. Van Boening honed the shot in his free moments.

Sufficiently primed, Van Boening sprinted to a 5-0 lead against a shaky Mekari in the winners-side final. Mekari

rallied with a couple fluked-in 9 balls, and eventually scraped his way to a 9-9 tie. He tried his luck with a chancy 1-8 combination in the next rack and paid the price when it went astray. Van Boening took over, leading to an 11-9 win and a comfy spot in the hot-seat.

Meanwhile, Moss was flying in from Sioux Falls. Keeping tabs on the Open over the Internet, he sensed a watershed moment in his pal's career.

"I thought, 'I have to get out there,'" he said. In the pitch black of early Saturday morning, he drove to the nearest airport and purchased a last-minute flight for the trek to Chesapeake.

THE ACTION on the losers' side resembled the Dresden March. After his meltdown against Mekari Friday evening, Ulrich jumped immediately to an adjoining table to face road player James Walden. After an 11-5 victory, a wasted Ulrich then dragged himself across the arena for a 2 a.m. match against Alcano in one of the make-up rounds. Slugging down Red Bulls to stay awake, he barely had the energy to stand. Alcano won the match, 11-3.

Likewise, after losing to Mekari, Souquet played an early morning contest against the Philippines' astonishing Ramil Gallego, who lost his first match of the tournament and then won the next 11 on the losers' side. The model



During a crucial stretch in the final, Alcano found himself on the defensive.

of stamina, Gallego hung with Souquet until 9-9, when the Kaiser took control for the 11-9 victory at 4:30 a.m.

The late night doomed Souquet in his 1 p.m. session against Alcano hours later. "I just couldn't focus or concentrate at all," he said. "I had a chance to win the first three games, but couldn't."

Trumping Souquet 11-3, Alcano went on to make short work of Mekari in the losers-side final, 11-5. The championship bout would be a rematch between Alcano and Van Boening.

Moss arrived at the arena with plenty of time before the final. So did Van Boening, who started practicing his break shot an hour before the scheduled start.

The final wasn't exactly a study in contrasts. Both players could spear tricky table-length cuts or lock up the cue ball if needed. Both relied on the cut break. Both floated around the table like willowy ghosts, silent and contemplative.

The outcome wasn't clear until the last few racks. Both players showed nerves early, clanking balls off the tight pock-

ets and struggling to find a productive speed on the break.

Tied at 8-8, Van Boening started to assert himself. Using his newly developed defensive skills, he won a crucial safety battle in the 17th rack, forcing Alcano to foul twice. Leading 10-9, Van Boening executed an expert jump kick safety that buried both the cue ball and object ball, forcing another Alcano foul.

As Van Boening built a 12-9 lead, the obviously partisan crowd roared with approval. None of it seemed to register with Van Boening. Only in the last rack did he begin to grin. Taking his time to size up shots and chalk his cue, he strolled around the table while conducting an elementary runout.

"This guy looks like he's practicing," marveled 2003 Open champion Gabe Owen, sitting a few yards away.

Van Boening dropped the final 9 and hefted his cue overhead. The gesture was less triumphant than a simple acknowledgement of his feat. Then he slouched back down in his chair with a soft, bemused smile.

"It feels real good," he said minutes later. "This is what I've been waiting for all my life."

His tone was sober, without an ounce of self-satisfaction. Perhaps his mind already had moved on to the obvious question implied by his convincing victories over Alcano: Was Shane Van Boening the best player in the world?

He wouldn't have long to wait for an answer. The World Pool Championship was set to begin in a couple weeks, and he had an invite to the 128-man field. True to form, he refused an invitation to talk some trash when prodded by a reporter: "I'm looking forward to it," he said. "We'll see what happens."

Commentator Jim Wych believed that he was America's top hope at the WPC.

"He's the best thing that has come out of North America in a long time," Wych said. "He's refreshing and he's got a real strong work ethic."

Owen sees no obvious flaws.

"He looks like he handles pressure really well, like he wants to be in the spotlight," Owen said. "It looks like this is what he's born to do."

With several of America's elite players distracted by business interests or in decline, Van Boening has claimed the mantle of America's best player. As with his new piece of U.S. Open hardware, he's not likely to let go.



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