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Gao, 3 teens among winners at table tennis trials

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CARY, N.C. (AP) – Gao Jun insisted all along that she could accept failure at the U.S. Olympic table tennis trials because she never planned to be here anyway.



By Travis Long, AP

Gao Jun defeated practice partner Judy Hugh in a five-set table tennis marathon on Friday at the U.S. Olympic team trials in Cary, N.C., on Friday.

EnlargeClose

By Travis Long, AP

Gao Jun defeated practice partner Judy Hugh in a five-set table tennis marathon on Friday at the U.S. Olympic team trials in Cary, N.C., on Friday.

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She rarely lost a set, let alone a match.

The four-time Olympian breezed through the trials, winning three matches Sunday to finish 11-0 and claim one of four women's berths in the North American Trials.

"I'm happy that I won all of the matches, but still, for me, no big deal," Gao said.

The other women's spots went to teenagers who each finished 9-2: 16-year-old Ariel Hsing, 15-year-old Lily Zhang and 15-year-old Erica Wu. Michael Landers (9-2), Barney Reed (8-3), Timothy Wang (8-3) and Adam Hugh (8-3) claimed the four men's spots.

Those eight will return to Cary for the continental trials in April, with the top three men and two women advancing to the Olympics.

"I've been dreaming about this moment for a really long time," Wu said. "But I know that this is not the final stage."

Gao, 43, won the silver medal in doubles playing for her native China in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, then immigrated to the U.S. a few years later and played three times for the Americans in the Olympics. Each time, she claimed automatic spots in the games with a top-20 world ranking.

That wasn't the case this year, and she wasn't even sure she was going to play the trials because of her commitments to coaching and operating a table tennis club in [El Monte](#), Calif. She didn't decide to come to Cary until the last minute.

But once she got here, she quickly established herself as the best women's player in the field. She lost only seven sets all weekend, and no player seeded lower than fifth claimed a set against her.

"The girls, they're good," Gao said. "They're still young."

The fourth women's spot came down to a winner-take-all match between one of Gao's practice partners — No. 5 seeded Wu, who lists Gao as one of her coaches — and fourth-seeded Judy Hugh. Wu claimed a five-set victory

that she finished by taking the final 10 points.

"It was very nerve-racking," Wu said. "I know both of us were really nervous, and when we walked up, our hands were kind of shaking. I just told myself that both of us are nervous, I'm not the only one feeling the pressure, and to try my best to relax. It was really hard, but it got better as the match went on."

The men's field was cloudy from start to finish, with No. 1 seed Yiyong Fan withdrawing roughly an hour before his first match Sunday. That gave three players — Adam Hugh, Reed and Peter Li — automatic wins by forfeit.

"I think it's safe to say we're all a little disappointed, because if he would have played, then it would have changed the whole tournament completely," Wang said.

Instead, it helped create a logjam in which three men entered their final match at 8-2, two others were at 7-3 and a sixth was at 6-4. Wang, who began the day well off the pace at 5-3, went 3-0 Sunday to play his way in, capping things with a six-set victory over Hugh.

"There was so much pressure. I knew that if I lost that match, I wouldn't have made it," Wang said. "So I just had to give it my all and just go for it."

That left four men's players at 8-3. Reed claimed second place because he was 3-0 against the other three. Wang and Hugh advanced via the tiebreaker — the percentage of match wins against the others — and Li was left out.

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Michael Morley

unbbelievable...peter li beat michael landers 4-0 on friday. and appeared to be the strongest except for the number 1 seed! i guess it is kind alike that childs game of hammer -scisosrs-rock -paper?

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