

Paddle of the titans

by Norma Meyer

LOS ANGELES - The pingpong plot may be screwy, but the bitty ball-slamming had to look legit. So the "Balls of Fury" actors, including star Dan Fogler and scene-stealer Christopher Walken - were trained by a U.S. table tennis Olympian who also coached Tom Hanks in "Forrest Gump."

"I must've whacked over 100,000 balls," says Fogler, who plays a tubby disgraced pingpong phenom in the comedy opening on Wednesday. Fogler prepped for the part by facing off against a "high-octane, 100 miles per hour, machine-gun-firing" ball-spitting device."

"I did have what you might call 'pingpong arm' from swinging my arm over and over and over again from a million different angles."

It took pros to whip Hollywood wrists into shape. Wei Wang, who competed in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta and won a bronze medal at the 1995 Pan-Am Games, and her instructor husband, Diego Schaaf, worked with the actors at their Los Angeles table tennis academy and also were the movie's on-set technical advisers.

"There was a lot of screaming off-camera, 'You're doing it wrong!'" Fogler shrieks, imitating Wang's voice.

But don't be fooled by the movie magic. All the bouncing little white spheres - except in one scene - are computer-generated. Despite boasts about hand-eye coordination, the thespians obviously couldn't speak their dialogue while furiously firing real balls back and forth.

Figuring out how to get the timing down for fake matches so CGI balls could be added later was a major pain, says the movie's director, Robert Ben Garant. He co-wrote the script with his "Reno 911!" co-star, Thomas Lennon, who portrays a leotard-wearing East German table tennis tart in "Balls of Fury."

"It took a lot of trial and error," Garant says about choreographing action for the CGI. "The only way to do it was to call out the words for the actors - 'Ping! Pong!'"

For example, when Wang offstage shouted "Ping!", Fogler knew it was his turn to hit the imaginary ball. When Diego hollered, "Pong!", Lennon took a swing.

"I heard it in my sleep ... 'Ping! Pong! Ping! Pong!'" Garant groans.

The only time real balls soar through the air on-screen is during a tournament scene in a Reno school gym. Garant says the competitors - which include Wang disguised as a nun and Schaaf as a priest - are actual world-class and pro players. "There are people who will flip out when they see that," Garant says, before pausing. "But not that many people. People who read pingpong magazines and stuff."

In the kung fu-type flick, Fogler plays Randy Daytona, a former Olympian trying to regain his athletic glory by helping an FBI agent (George Lopez) catch a murderous table tennis crime boss (Walken). Along the way, Daytona is thrown into the seedy underworld of table tennis.

When Fogler, a Tony Award winner for "25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee," first got the script, saw the "Balls of Fury" title and his character's name, he says he had one thought: "Is this a porno?"

Garant and Lennon, who co-wrote the hit movie "Night at the Museum," came up with the extreme pingpong idea after seeing a news item about a Scandinavian man who beat out top Asian table tennis contenders.

"He couldn't walk streets in Japan without being mobbed like Bono. We loved the idea of a guy who's a superstar at something that nobody takes seriously here," Garant says. The writing team set out to do research: "We Googled."

Both Garant (Deputy Travis Junior on "Reno 911!") and Lennon (Lt. Dangle) got really hyped after finding photos of Communist China table tennis training facilities, complete with armed guards and beautiful pagodas. "It was like "something out of 'The Last Emperor,'" the director says.

The pair wrote the screenplay in 2001, but it sat around for years until Walken agreed to take the part of the fey kimono-clad villain, Feng. "Suddenly people started returning our calls," says Garant, who also cast Maggie Q as a table tennis maven and James Hong as her blind uncle and master of the sport.

Before filming began, the pingpong-playing actors did a weeklong crash course with Wang and Schaaf, who continued instruction on the set.

"There's this giant banquet scene with 100 extras, and Walken has this big monologue and everybody's doing

their thing and the take turns out great," Garant recalls. "And Wei Wang would walk up and say 'Uh-uh, no. You would never hold a paddle like that. You would never serve like that.' She was really hard on us."

"There's another long scene where Christopher Walken is playing pingpong in the jungle and talking - it was another long take. Our pingpong experts would come up and say, 'No, unacceptable. There's no way that ball would've reached Randy 7 feet away.'"

Of course, with all the silliness, explosions and players being snuffed out by poisonous darts, the fine nuances of pingpong might be lost on the audience. Still, Garant notes his pingpong pros taught Oscar-winning Hanks about ball-swatting and obviously know their stuff.

And if it ever came to a match-up between Randy Daytona and Forrest Gump?

"Oh, I'd kill him!" Fogler exclaims. "If you watch his movie, he's really only got one stroke down. I've got at least two."

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