

OOAK Interview with Panagiotis GIONIS (Greece, born 7-1-1980, WR 21)



INTRODUCTION

Panagiotis GIONIS (born January 7, 1980) is a Greek defensive table tennis player (chopper) and a dentist. He is member of the Greek National Team and has competed in 3 Olympics and many World and European Championships. He has been playing professionally in Germany and France (Angers) since 2001. Currently he is playing for the German top club Borussia Düsseldorf together with Timo Boll, Patrick Franziska & Achanta and is being sponsored by Tamasu Butterfly. Gionis was third in the men's single 2013 European Championships and second with Greece in the team event. He is currently ranked 21st in the world and 7th in Europe. His best result was WR 20 in November 2014.

THE INTERVIEW

PERSONAL HISTORY AND FUTURE

Why and when did you decide to be a defensive player?

I was nine years old when I started playing table tennis. I wanted to play football like all the other children but my parents were afraid that I'd get injured so I went to a table tennis club that was very close to home. It was the Romanian coach from that club, George Kurou, who noticed I had better skills than my team-mates so he started training me. And he was a old defender. In less then one year, I made it to the national youth team.

Is there a particular table tennis player that inspired you to play defense?

When I was in the National team, I could see the former Juniors European champion Daniel Tsiokas playing. He really was a big source of inspiration for me. He also gave me a lot of advice in my Juniors period before going to the seniors team. We always shared our room and had some great moments together.

You are one of those players who seldom (or never) change equipment. What other blades or rubbers did you use in the past?

Indeed, I have always played the same equipment. Only before I played Butterfly Tackifire D instead of Tenergy. I am not a guy that likes many changes.. I am satisfied with my equipment and I trust it for 100%..

It seems that many defensive players, such as yourself, peak at a later age than offensive players. Why do you think this is the case? And in your case, how can you explain your current success at age of 34 with a 21th place on the world ranking?

I think there are three reasons for me. First of all, I never practiced table tennis professionally until the age of 22 because of my studying to university as a dentist. Only after I finished my studies I started to practice more hours and two times a day. Secondly, I feel that defense is a totally different style of playing so you need to improve many things during practice and that means you need more time... And thirdly, pimples need a lot of feeling and I think that during the years you understand better the philosophy of pimples... Anyway I think that for defense you need more experience than offensive players.

To what match do you have the best memories or what do you consider as your best match ever?

My best game would have to be in the European Championships in 2013. It was against Samsonov in the semifinals. I won that match and we moved on to the final and also got the Silver medal...

Also, a match I will never forget was in the round of 16 at the 2012 London Olympics against Kishikawa. I had match ball and lost a very easy point. I will never forget it... My worst game would have to be in the European Championships in 2007. In the Quarter finals we were playing against Croatia and I lost both my matches. Therefore, we were not able to advance to the semifinals and lost the medal...

How long do you want to go on with table tennis at top level? We all hope it will be for a long time?

I really hope to continue a bit more... If my body is ok and I have no injuries I think I will go on for 4 to 5 years more.

EQUIPMENT

Is your Korbelt blade a normal standard sized blade or is it customized oversized (like other defensive blades). What sponge thickness do you use under your Feint Long II? And what Tenergy are you using and what thickness?

My Butterfly Korbelt blade is Japanese and special weight just for me, heavier than in production. Tenergy 05 is 2.1 and Feint Long II is 1.1



Why did you choose for Feint Long II on your backhand and not Feint Long III or TSP Curl P1r or any other pips?

I play with Feint Long II since I was a young boy and this means I am most confident with this rubber and also I know the tricks it can do.

What are your impressions of the ITTF, and the impact these decisions are having on players and the sport?

I think ITTF make many changes and very often those are not good for the sport... Anyway it is their decision and we have to accept.

Do you have any comments on the new poly ball? It would be very interesting to read your comments on how the poly ball will affect defenders. Are you thinking about changing your setup because of the poly ball?

I think the plastic balls are not so good for defenders because the rotation is less... Anyway a good defender at top level must have also good attack so I'm trying to think it like it's the same for everybody.. My opinion is that this is not the main problem but the quality of the balls are very bad so I hope soon this will be improved...

I believe you're currently sponsored by Butterfly, correct? What sort of support do you get from your sponsor?

Butterfly supports me a lot in many things and I want to thank them for it...

Do you get much involvement in testing and development of their new equipment? For example the Gionis Carbon blades?

Of course I have tested all my blades and I am the one that told them my opinion for each blade...

TECHNIQUE & STYLE

Do you think the modern defensive style is a 'dying art', or do you think it will grow as it's much more interesting and entertaining to watch?

I think that during the years there will be more defenders...It's more exciting for spectators and I really hope to see more and more defenders...

Do you play more aggressively now than 10 years ago? If so, why is that?

I play more aggressively because against current top players it is difficult to win only with defense...

On your forehand, when away from the table, if not attacking, you mostly fish, rather than chop. Why? What is the aim of your forehand fishing?

My aim is to prepare for a good forehand far from the table so that the opponent will be surprised..

Have you ever tried to twiddle your blade? Why do you choose not to twiddle?

It depends on the opponent. Sometimes I do it and sometimes I don't. In the German Bundesliga match against Gacina for example, I did it regularly and it worked well.

Why do so few of the top defenders attack with their pimples?

Because it is so very difficult, especially with long pimples..

When pushing, what do you mainly think about? Depth, height, spin variation, location... How do you play your pushes to set up your game?

Pushing must be deep and not so high from the net... Spin variation is also very important: spin versus no spin is the best way to confuse the opponent...

How does "psychology" play a role in your table tennis game?

Psychology has the most important role in table tennis.. If you are afraid or if you are not playing with confidence, you simply can't be a good player even if you practice many many hours...

PROFESSIONAL SCENE

Who are your most difficult opponents? Can you describe what exactly give you the most difficulty?

The Chinese of course because they are very fast and strong. Also, you can never find an easy point so this creates stress and makes you to take risks...

Can you describe what is it like to play against other top defensive players such as Joo SaeHyuk? What particular strategy do you use against defensive players?

There is no special strategy against defense... Just when I serve against defenders I'm trying to attack their ball and if I see I have problems then I'm playing more defensively..

Which top players are really nice guys and do you consider as your 'friends'? Is there a particular strong friendship amongst defensive players?

I have no specific strong friendship relation with any defender... Most players I know are nice guys. Timo Boll is an unbelievably nice guy and so is Franziska and Kamal [Achantu]... Also I have some good contacts with my ex-teammates from Angers [French league]: Jens Lundquist and Martinez and Brossier...

Do you think there is currently a defender who has the potential to make it to the world's top 10?

Joo Se Hyuk is definitely the best defender in the world. He is the only one that was top 10 in the world for many years.

How do you like playing in the German Bundesliga for Borussia Dusseldorf? How is the atmosphere?

It was hard to leave Angers where I had five great years, but Borussia was a big step for my career because it is the best team in Europe. I was warmly welcomed there and I like the atmosphere a lot. It really is fantastic and gives me more power to continue and to fight for each win..



OTHER QUESTIONS

Are you a full time pro since you are playing in the German TTBL? Or do you combine your job as a dentist with a career in table tennis?

It is only the last 3 years that I am totally professional and I'm not working as a dentist..

Can you tell us something about your life outside of table tennis?

Food: Sushi, Cabbage rolls (Greek Traditional Cuisine: Lachanodolmades)
Restaurant: "Square Sushi" in Kefalari-Athens (Greece)
Music: House, RnB, Greek
Hobbies: Movies, Play Station, Swimming
City: New York, Rome, Athens
Vacation Place: Creta

Do you get a lot of female attention in the TT world? I suppose you do. Any story you'd like to share?

I don't really have any story about female fans. Just like with the other players, they take some photos or ask for autographs..

Would you like to give an inspiration message for the many defensive players?

I wish everybody in the forum a happy new year with health and happiness... My inspirational message to the defenders is that they need to be patience because it simply takes time to understand the philosophy of defense. Also, the biggest secret is not to expect to win the point only from defense but to try to find the right moment to surprise the opponent with attack.

