

## HISTORY This Week EP 423: Ping Pong Diplomacy EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week

**Kaelen Jones:** AND Sports History This Week.

**Sally Helm:** April 10th.

**Kaelen Jones:** 1971.

**Sally Helm:** I'm Sally Helm.

**Kaelen Jones:** And I'm Kaelen Jones.

**Sally Helm:** Kaelen, we are sort of ping ponging back and forth here...

**Kaelen Jones:** We are, and that is for a reason! This story is about ping pong.

**Sally Helm:** It is about ping pong...and about one of the biggest geopolitical shifts of the twentieth century, I think that is fair to say. It has to do with relations between the US and China. We're starting on April 10 of 1971. At this moment, no American group has been invited to China in over 20 years.

**Kaelen Jones:** And against all odds, the people to change that are a ragtag group of American table tennis players. And we got to talk to three of the four living members of the team! One of them is Connie Sweeris, who was just 23 when she stepped off the bridge leading from Hong Kong to China.

**Connie Sweeris:** The border crossing that we went was an old train bridge, I think that we walked across. We had to haul our luggage across that border. There were red Army guards standing there with rifles. And they told us they would take our passports and I thought, oh my goodness. I'm going into a communist country. I'm not gonna have a passport. If anything happened, would we get out?

**Kaelen Jones:** Today:

**Sally Helm:** Ping pong diplomacy.

**Kaelen Jones:** How did *table tennis* turn into a powerful tool of foreign policy?

**Sally Helm:** And how did these athletes leave an impact that went far beyond a nine by five ping pong table?

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Kaelen before we get into this story which is a high-stakes geopolitical drama, I want to start by asking you about ping pong. Because one of the funniest things about this story is that ping pong, table tennis, is a crucial part of the geopolitical drama!! So, I guess my question is, did you play ping pong growing up? What are your memories of ping pong?

**Kaelen Jones:** I did play as a kid, in elementary school, back at Chino Valley Christian school, we played after school all the time. I would play with this kid named Jason Wu, and I didn't really challenge him too often because he was much much better than me. Had a beautiful spin move.

**Sally Helm:** Oh nice, Jason. Good job. I got caught out by a spin move in my time as well. Those are hard to return.

**Kaelen Jones:** Yeah, what about you?

**Sally Helm:** Well, I don't know I'm a little bit reluctant to admit this because I know my family listens to this podcast but when it comes to ping pong I have no backhand, I only have a forehand. So, I have to scootch back and forth on the table. So, I'm sure I've just sunk my ping pong prospects for the future by revealing that to you here. So yeah, I played growing up, I played mostly like on summer vacation. Which I guess like it sounds to me like you, and I had the classic ping pong experience, at least classic in the way that I think of it like rec rooms, and you know, playing with your sister. But ping pong is of course a real, serious sport for real serious athletes.

**Kaelen Jones:** Yeah! There are professional table tennis players, and I actually talked to a few of them. Including Olga Soltesz. She's been playing professionally since she was a teenager, and she takes it very seriously.

**Olga Soltesz:** When you have a table tennis racket, you get rubber, you know, for both sides. And there's hundreds of different kinds, you know, cause it has to do with the spin off the rubber, or if you're a hitter, it's different than if you're a spinner and all that.

**Kaelen Jones:** I can't lie to you, you're kind of blowing my mind right now. I never considered that.

**Olga Soltesz:** You know, I'm sure basement players or neighborhood players just pick up any racket that's in the room or something. But you know, the equipment is a lot more sophisticated.

**Sally Helm:** In the 1970s, when Olga is perfecting her sidespin serve, the American table tennis world is kinda like a small town—a lot of the players get into it because their parents played, and everyone kinda knows everyone.

**Kaelen Jones:** It's not the kind of thing people are watching on TV or selling trading cards for. Top-ranked player Connie Sweeris told us, people often wondered why she'd take up a sport like ping pong.

**Connie Sweeris:** Because there was no sports scholarships, but we did it more because we really enjoyed the sport. It's fast and it has a lot of spin and speed to it.

**Kaelen Jones:** Connie grew up in Michigan and picked it up the same way the rest of us do.

**Connie Sweeris:** We had a table in our basement, so it was really a family game. And at that time, there was no girls' sports in high school. And so, my brother was a very good athlete and he taught me how to play table tennis. So that's how I started playing better and better and better.

**Kaelen Jones:** And better. By 1971, when Connie's just twenty-two, she's the American Triple Crown champion.

**Sally Helm:** Wow! I did not know we had a triple crown champion I have to say.

**Kaelen Jones:** Apparently, we do.

**Connie Sweeris:** At that point, I was ranked number one, and so I automatically had a spot on the team.

**Sally Helm:** That team is being selected to compete at the world table tennis championships. That year's contest is being held in Nagoya, Japan.

**Kaelen Jones:** But you've gotta remember, there's no money in American ping pong.

**Connie Sweeris:** So, we had to pay part of our way to that world championships. A couple people dropped out because they just didn't wanna pay the money to go.

**Kaelen Jones:** That's how 17-year-old Olga Soltesz ends up getting a spot on the team.

**Olga Soltesz:** Luckily the high school I went to, they raised money for me, and it was really neat because every morning in homeroom they'd say, oh, we got her as far as California, or, oh, she's almost to Hawaii. You know, they raised the funds. It was really nice.

**Kaelen Jones:** And she's not even the youngest player who ends up qualifying. That's 15-year-old Judy Bochenski—today, her last name is Hoarfrost. I spoke to her, too.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** I made the US team by the skin of my teeth. Not everybody can just pick up and leave. For me, I was fine with missing that much school.

**Kaelen Jones:** Yeah. I've bet at 15 years old you're like, oh, two weeks to leave school, go play some ping pong. I don't blame you.

**Sally Helm:** Ok so the ragtag US team is now assembled and ready to go to the championships in Japan.

**Kaelen Jones:** The country to beat is China.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** It's been their national sport since, Mao Zedong played in the caves during the revolution.

**Kaelen Jones:** That really did happen. Apparently, Mao Zedong, China's leader, loved ping pong so much that he played it during the Communist revolution that brought him to power in 1949. Inside a cave while he was waiting out a bombing raid.

**Sally Helm:** And since that time, since his rise to power, Mao has been pushing ping pong on the country. Nicholas Griffin, who is the author of a book on ping pong diplomacy, he told us about this.

**Nicholas Griffin:** You can only have a national sport if you have success in a national sport. The problem was, they had no money. And there was no way they could compete at sports that have already achieved professional status across the world, like soccer or basketball. So, they came up with something called the small ball theory. Which was basically that you could get a high return off the low amount of money.

**Kaelen Jones:** Ok, so it's much easier and cheaper to become the best at a sport like ping pong. A small ball sport.

**Sally Helm:** It is indeed a small ball sport, one of the smallest balls that I can think of in a sport. But there's another thing which is that Mao also knows that the head of the international table tennis association at the time is a British communist. Which possibly made ping pong even more appealing for a communist leader like Mao.

**Kaelen Jones:** Ah, so it's an easy choice to make this the national sport.

**Nicholas Griffin:** They actually turn themselves into a world championship program within a decade. By the time the sixties roll around, they are without doubt the number one team in the world.

**Sally Helm:** These Chinese ping pong players are treated like celebrities. When they traveled to a tournament, they were accompanied by chefs and photographers and masseurs.

**Kaelen Jones:** Wow. The American athletes have to pay for their own airfare and that's happening?

**Sally Helm:** I know, right, it's completely different. The Chinese table tennis champions are even invited to summer on the beach with the Communist Party elite. And Mao also sends them off on missions to other countries to teach ping pong and to hopefully spread Chinese cultural influence along with it.

**Nicholas Griffin:** You've got these great moments where they were sending sort of an advanced team of ping pong players to sort of soften relations with countries such as Ghana.

**Kaelen Jones:** It's they're like door-to-door salesmen almost.

**Sally Helm:** Yeah, kind of or I don't know like, ping pong missionaries. I mean they're ping pong diplomats, that's what they are, they're being sent around the world on these missions. But by 1971, China is coming out of a rough period. Remember, it is not at that point the global power that it is today. The country is suffering economically. And Mao recently had tried to enforce this radical period of change called the Cultural Revolution. He had totally shut off the country from the rest of the world in an attempt to root out what he considered impure influences.

**Nicholas Griffin:** And anyone who is successful in China, now automatically becomes a form of villain. And that even includes celebrities such as the entire ping pong team.

**Sally Helm:** During the Cultural Revolution, suddenly, anything foreign is suspect—so being an athlete who plays your sport internationally? Suddenly not so good. Some of the players are jailed. Others are exiled to the countryside to cut wheat. Some are even driven to suicide.

**Kaelen Jones:** Looking at China from across the ocean, Judy Hoarfrost remembers how mysterious it all was.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** China was a huge unknown. It was behind the bamboo curtain as the newspapers would say. No one knew, where are the players? How are they gonna play? They haven't been outside of China playing table tennis. Are they okay? What, what's going on?

**Sally Helm:** But in 1971, Mao has a new goal that requires him to backtrack on the course of the Cultural Revolution. Because his relationship with the Soviet Union has gotten strained. There is conflict on the border. And he thinks that improving relations with America, his far away enemy, that is the way to strengthen China's position against the Soviet Union.

I spoke about this with Yafeng Xia, who's a history professor at Long Island University Brooklyn. He grew up in China and specializes in US-China relations during the Cold War.

**Yafeng Xia:** So, Mao was seriously considering that he should try to improve relations with United States. He couldn't deal with two enemies, you attack your close neighbor, if you have to, and you make friends with the country far away. Soviet Union become his enemy, number one. So, he believed that he need to improve relations with his enemy number two. So that's the United States.

**Kaelen Jones:** So, Mao has basically decided he needs to team up with the US against the Soviet Union.

**Sally Helm:** Right. And Xia says that US President Richard Nixon is also ready to make friends with Mao.

**Yafeng Xia:** Before he was running for president, he published an article, basically said, China is a country with 25% of world's population, armed with nuclear weapon. So, we have to bring China into international society. He also wanted to improve relations with Communist China in the hope that it will eventually help him to bring the war in Vietnam to an end.

**Sally Helm:** China has been supporting North Vietnam, America has been supporting South Vietnam. Nixon thinks if he can smooth things over with Mao, China might back off in Vietnam.

**Kaelen Jones:** Ok so now both Mao and Nixon want to be friends. But they need to take a really roundabout approach to get there.

**Sally Helm:** Why can't they just call each other? What's the problem with that?

**Yafeng Xia:** Because United States and China has demonized each other, has cursed each other in public propaganda, in media, in newspaper, for 20 years.

**Sally Helm:** When China looked at the US, like what was the demonized picture that they saw?

**Yafeng Xia:** In Chinese view, United States was aggressor. The United States was the head of the imperialist capitalist countries. So United States wanted to destroy communist regime in China.

**Sally Helm:** What was sort of the demonized version of China that the US saw?

**Yafeng Xia:** From American point of view, China want to spread communism in the world, China was the expansionist. China was aggressor to the free world.

**Sally Helm:** So, Mao and Nixon need to get creative. They are doing this high-level diplomatic flirting. Nixon calls China the “People’s Republic” in a speech—so he’s using the Communist party’s preferred name. China eases trade restrictions. Nixon sends his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, to Pakistan, for some secret backdoor conversations with China.

**Kaelen Jones:** But they aren’t really getting anywhere. So, Mao has a new idea. It involves ping pong.

**Sally Helm:** Remember, ping pong is China's national sport. They've sent ping pong players as diplomatic pawns before. It's not such a huge leap.

**Yafeng Xia:** Chinese leader, people like Mao Zedong, they know China was weak. So, by using ping pong, because Chinese players were always the champions, the number one in world competition. By using ping pong as the medium, to reengage the world, to reengage United States will present China in a very positive light.

**Sally Helm:** So, in 1971, Mao calls back the Chinese champions from their exile harvesting wheat. And he throws them straight into the international political arena.

**Kaelen Jones:** Meanwhile, across the ocean, the American team is gearing up for their big trip.

Olga Soltesz had never left the country before. She can still remember the car ride to LAX, crammed in with the other players.

**Olga Soltesz:** Get Your Motor Running what's the name of that song? Born to Be Wild.

**Born To Be Wild Archival:** *Looking for adventure in whatever comes our way...*

**Olga Soltesz:** Yep. I remember they crammed a bunch of us in a car, Born to Be Wild was blaring on the radio, and I mean, the song fit, it was really neat. Yeah. I'll never forget that.

**Born To Be Wild Archival:** *Born to be wild...*

**Sally Helm:** "Born to be wild." It fits this underdog gaggle of table tennis players... who are now flying across the ocean to compete in Japan.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** When the American ping pong posse lands in Nagoya, they are ranked twenty third in the world. They have no expectations that they have really any shot at winning.

**Kaelen Jones:** Olga Soltesz and Connie Sweeris remember the opening ceremony.

**Olga Soltesz:** Every country marches out just like the Olympics.

**Connie Sweeris:** A through z. You all march in and then they play your national anthem.

**Sally Helm:** Fifty-eight teams' parade through the arena. Author Nicholas Griffin says the American team was really diverse.

**Nicholas Griffin:** This accidentally incredibly representative group of Americans that include everything from immigrants to hippies, teenage girls, a Black man who worked inside the UN. I mean, it couldn't have been a more representative group of Americans if they'd actually been trying.

**Sally Helm:** Griffin writes that the Americans are also the only team without matching uniforms. They're each dressed in different colors and styles under their USA jackets. The Chinese athletes, on the other hand, are all dressed in crimson red tracksuits.

**Nicholas Griffin:** The Chinese team is being run by an army intelligence analyst at that time. The sports program is run by the greatest general who's ever lived and who's still alive in China. Phone calls from the team are going straight to Mao every single day. So, this is not a sports team heading to a world championship. This is a team of diplomats who are involved in one of the greatest realignments in diplomatic history.

**Kaelen Jones:** What do you remember about the Chinese team?

**Olga Soltesz:** I don't think you could get near them that much. They came in and out together.

**Connie Sweeris:** They did keep their players kind of separated. In fact, I think they brought their own somewhat cooks with them and laundry people. They were very protective of their players.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** They didn't seem to smile much. That was my perspective at the time.

**Kaelen Jones:** The Americans aren't even competing in the same division as the Chinese team. They're ranked way below them. But they do get to watch the Chinese athletes play.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** To my mind they were, you know, the gods of table tennis.

**Olga Soltesz:** We were awestruck. I think.

**Kaelen Jones:** When Judy and Olga, the youngest American athletes, are free, they sit on the sidelines. Check out the styles of play... and other things.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** We'd watch matches together and she would share which player she had a crush on and, you know, things like that.

**Sally Helm:** Connie Sweeris manages to win one single's match, against a French player. Her double's teammate is a particularly big personality named Glenn Cowan. Glenn died back in 2004, but in the memories of his teammates, he's still a vivid figure.

**Connie Sweeris:** He wore purple dye bell bottom pants. His hair was long, and he wore a bandana thing around his head.

**Olga Soltesz:** He was a hundred percent hippie.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** He had kind of an outgoing personality he kind of always, marched to his own drummer. Glen did what Glen wanted to do.

**Sally Helm:** So, to his teammates, it's not a huge surprise when one day their bus leaves the competition, and they realize... Glenn is not on it.

**Connie Sweeris:** You know, that's typical of Glenn. He was kind of in his own little world and, time schedules for him was, you know, if he made it, he made it. If he didn't, he didn't. So, we just said that's Glen.

**Sally Helm:** So just imagine you're Glenn Cowan. You're in your own little world. You've missed the team's bus. And to your surprise, as you're walking along, back toward town, you get flagged down by a group of players on another bus. The Chinese team's bus.

**Kaelen Jones:** So now remember, this is a *big deal*—the Chinese team has been separated from the other players. They've got tight security, and they're reporting to Mao himself three times a day.

**Sally Helm:** Glenn may not know that last part, but he does know that no one's been hanging out with the Chinese players. And yet when they wave him down to get on their bus, he decides to hop on board. Take a ride along with the Chinese team. Professor Xia told me what happens next.



**Yafeng Xia:** The best-known player in the Chinese delegation, he was sitting at the back of the bus. He dare to took out a gift and walk to the front of the bus and presented the gift, which is a silk screen, image of the Chinese famous mountain called Ang. Which he presented to Glenn Cowan.

**Sally Helm:** The top Chinese ping pong player hands Glenn this gift. He accepts it. And when the bus arrives at the stadium, Glenn walks off... and into an animated crowd of photographers.

**Yafeng Xia:** Many of the journalists they were waiting outside of the bus, and they took the picture, very exciting that the Chinese World Championship, Zhuang Zedong was presenting a gift to the American player Glenn Cowan.

**Kaelen Jones:** Judy Hoarfrost remembers when Glenn made his way back to the American group.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** He talked about that later to our team, he's like super excited about it, and this is so great. This is so great. I need to get a gift for them.

**Kaelen Jones:** So instead of watching the competition, Glenn sets out to go shopping for a gift to give the Chinese delegation in return.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** And he found a shirt that said, let it be, I think it had an American flag. It said, let it be on it. And then when we were walking in. I think he kind of waited till there were cameras around. I think it was kind of purposeful. That's my perspective. 50 years later, it seemed rather like he, you know, was kind of looking around, when's a good time to do this? And he did, present Zhuang Zedong with that "Let it Be" shirt.

**Kaelen Jones:** And if Glenn was going for a photo opp with that timing... he gets it. The press eats up this moment as this spontaneous act of friendship between two players. Divided by nationality, brought together through the love of sports.

**Sally Helm:** Right. But author Nicholas Griffin told us, there is more to the story.

**Nicholas Griffin:** Everything about it was predetermined. I mean, Kissinger has said in later years that the Chinese had an extraordinary for giving the impression of spontaneity when there was none. They'd been watching all week. They knew he was the sort of guy who would say yes. He was a risk taker. He was unlike anyone else on that team. And he was also someone very fond of the limelight.

**Sally Helm:** Griffin's found evidence that the Chinese team intended to facilitate just this kind of moment before they even left for the tournament.

**Nicholas Griffin:** The real giveaway was, later on the number one player in China. Choong admitted that he had pre-selected the gift that he then gives. Glen Cowan on that bus. He had been allowed to go to this store, in Beijing where diplomats would choose higher level presents to give to other diplomats.

**Sally Helm:** Across the ocean in China, Mao has been watching all this intently. And he's happy with what he's hearing about this gift swap between the American and Chinese players. But the tournament in Japan is about to end. The American team is getting ready to head home.

**Kaelen Jones:** Back to the place where ping pong is an obscure sport nobody follows. That people play in frat basements with no regard to the type of rubber on their rackets!

**Sally Helm:** Ugh, terrible! But Mao has already invited a few other table tennis teams to visit Beijing when the competition ends. And professor Xia told us, before bed one night, Mao is mulling over an idea. What if we invite the American team to visit, too.

**Yafeng Xia:** Mao had a problem sleeping. So, he took a sleeping pill, but he was thinking, he couldn't sleep. He was reading the reference news and he saw the photos of Johnson with Glen Cowen. and he immediately called his secretary and said, *please invite the American delegation.*

**Sally Helm:** What do you make of the fact that he was on sleeping pills at the time? Like does that factor into why he makes this?

**Yafeng Xia:** Well, yes, actually, his secretary says, *well, chairman, you told me before that after sleeping pill, whatever decision you made will not count, but this time does it count?* Mao says, *yes, yes, yes.*

**Sally Helm:** Back in Nagoya, it's April 7.

**Olga Soltesz:** The very last day of the world championships.

**Kaelen Jones:** 17-year-old Olga Soltesz is at a team meeting when they're given the news: they've been invited on an all-expense paid trip. To become the first American group allowed in China in over 20 years.

**Olga Soltesz:** And Judy and I were minors. So, we had to call our parents and get permission. I remember calling my dad and it was in the middle of the night here. And waking them up and saying, you know, *can I go to China?*

**Sally Helm:** It's so funny to imagine these teenagers calling their parents as if they're kids being like, "hey can I sleep over at my friend's house?"

**Kaelen Jones:** Yeah, but it's China, where no one is allowed to go.

**Sally Helm:** Right like are the parents just like, I guess you can, can you? Like can I give you permission to go to China? Like no one has permission to go to China. But ok, Olga's father agrees. So do Judy's parents. Olga and Judy and Connie and all but two of their teammates agree to visit Beijing. Even though they don't really know what they're going to find there.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** We didn't know if we would be safe. In fact, one of the members of our team who was from South Korea, Dal, June Lee, he was our national champion, he decided he didn't wanna take that chance, so he didn't go.

**Sally Helm:** For the players who do go, this is an amazing opportunity to play their sport against the best players in the world. And to travel somewhere they've never been before. But to a lot of people watching, this invitation doesn't look like it's about ping pong at all.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** As soon as it became known that we were going to China, immediately there was just an extreme amount of attention on us.

**Kaelen Jones:** At their final dinner in Nagoya, Judy recalls paparazzi swarming around her team.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** We're just trying to eat our little dinner, and cameras are just all around us. And I spilled my Coke and then all the lightbulbs go, *flash, flash, flash, flash, flash, flash, flash* from spilling a coke at dinner. It was a lot of attention.

**Sally Helm:** On April 10, the athletes fly to Hong Kong. Then walk across that bridge to cross that bridge into China.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** I have a very strong memory of they were playing music like rousing, Chinese, national anthem type music.

**Connie Sweeris:** Once we crossed the border, everybody was so friendly and we were taken to a station where we had tea and then taken to Canton to have a lunch, and that's when we got introduced to their Chinese food, not American Chinese food.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** Of course, then we went to Beijing.

**Olga Soltesz:** Peking. It was Peking then, not Beijing.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** It's very different than it is now. Now it's like any big city, but then, the highest building was probably two to four stories high. And it, it seemed like everything was just all one color.

**Connie Sweeris:** No one drove cars, at that time, except for the military. They rode mostly on bicycles, or they had donkeys with wagons, you know, that they'd carry all their stuff in.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** People on the street would just kinda all stare at us and wonder, what are you doing here?

**Connie Sweeris:** Boy, before we knew it, we had a whole crowd walking behind us looking at us like, who are these people?

**Sally Helm:** The Americans are taken on a whirlwind tour of Beijing's greatest hits. They visit the Great Wall of China. Tour the Summer Palace. Meet with the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, who asks their team captain whether he has any criticism of the trip so far.

**Connie Sweeris:** And he said, *yes, I do*. And the whole audience kind of gasped, like, oh no, he's the one that told us to be on our best behavior. Now he's gonna criticize? And he said, *you feed us too much*. And everybody laughed because every place we went, we would have like an eight to 10 course banquet meal.

**Sally Helm:** Of course, the team also does what they were ostensibly there to do. Play table tennis. In a stadium packed with 20,000 spectators.

**Connie Sweeris:** You'd be lucky in the United States at our national competition to get 300 or 400 people to come and watch it. Mostly family and friends.

**Olga Soltesz:** We played what you call exhibition matches. They're not like smashing it and ending the point in two seconds, or the spin is so hard and angle you can't even touch the ball. The Chinese made us look good.

**Connie Sweeris:** When one of us would win a point, they would all just clap in unison, you know? It, it was almost as if they had been told, you know, when we win a point, clap.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** I won three outta four matches. Why is that? The reason is what they said over and over again to us, which was friendship first, competition second.

**Sally Helm:** Friendship first, competition second.

After about a week in China, the Americans board a train back to Hong Kong, to catch a flight home to the States. Judy Hoarfrost remembers the moment the train crossed the border out of Chinese territory.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** It was so packed. There was no room to move, and cameras in our face. And you know, it was like so much overwhelming attention. A reporter came to me and handed me a newspaper, but they said, look, there's a picture of you on the cover of this newspaper, shaking hands with Premier Chou En-lai and your picture was picked up by the associated precedents on all the front pages of all the newspapers around the world.

**Kaelen Jones:** On her flight home to Eugene, Oregon, reporters bought the airplane seats next to Judy's so they could interview her the whole way back.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** I was, you know, interviewed by Barbara Walters for the Today Show, and I was, you know, asked to speak here, there, I mean, 15 years old, but I'm asked, you know, to give my political opinions on everything.

**Sally Helm:** President Nixon has been watching all of this unfold with delight. His new go-to line greeting White House visitors becomes, "Have you learned to play ping pong yet?"

**Kaelen Jones:** Seems like it's the president's new favorite sport.

**Sally Helm:** How are people back in the US responding to this visit? How are they talking about it?

**Yafeng Xia:** Overall the response was very positive. They had a chance to see what communist China looked like and through American players. Kissinger actually said this was a International Sensation and that the White House immediately took measures to suspend the economic embargo against China, which has been imposed during the Korean War.

**Kaelen Jones:** Before long, Nixon is sending Kissinger himself to Beijing. And by summer, the president has announced that'll be visiting, too. Becoming the first sitting president in US history to visit China.

**Sally Helm:** Professor Xia told me; the American visit also left an impact on the ground in China.

**Yafeng Xia:** This ping pong, players visit to Beijing, to China, prepared the Chinese people, psychologically and emotionally, for the change of relation, between these two countries, so it become very smooth. It seems that, many of the hurdles between US China conduct was removed.

**Kaelen Jones:** Friendship first, competition second. Ping pong diplomacy worked!

**Sally Helm:** But Professor Xia told us, we shouldn't jump to any conclusions that a similar move could work today.

**Yafeng Xia:** In 1971, the US and China, they have not been in contact for 20 some years. So, they kind of got into a love affair and they were eager to know each other, to engage with each other. But after like 50 years of kind of a marriage between these two side, there are many grievances, many hatreds, many mistrust. And a sports event will not be able to change the current situation.

**Sally Helm:** In other words, if the US and China were flirting in 1971, they have since been married...

**Kaelen Jones:** And that marriage... is on the rocks. It'll take a lot more than a tiny ball and rubber rackets to repair.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to HISTORY This Week—

**Kaelen Jones:** And Sports History This Week.

**Sally Helm:** For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, [HistoryThisWeek@History.com](mailto:HistoryThisWeek@History.com), or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

**Kaelen Jones:** Special thanks to our professional table tennis playing guests: Judy Hoarfrost.

**Judy Hoarfrost:** You know you're a part of history when your kids come home from school and say, mom, you're in the history book!

**Kaelen Jones:** Olga Soltesz.

**Olga Soltesz:** For probably the first five years I'd go into a supermarket, and somebody would say, oh, aren't you the girl that went to China?

**Kaelen Jones:** And Connie Sweeris.

**Connie Sweeris:** If you take government and politics out of situations, you break down all those barriers and you're able to communicate with each other.

**Sally Helm:** And thanks to Yafeng Xia, senior professor of social science at Long Island University Brooklyn, and author of *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949-1972*; and Nicholas Griffin, author of *Ping Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World*.

**Kaelen Jones:** This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week and Sports History This Week are also produced by David Ingber, Cooper McKim, and Corinne Wallace. Our associate producers are Hazel May and Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

**Sally Helm:** Don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review HISTORY This Week, and Sports History This Week, wherever you get your podcasts, and we will both see you next week!

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