

Today marks the 35th birthday of one of the best table hockey players. And we couldn't help but ask to visit him to find out how the 2024 European champion is doing.

**- Good evening, Edgars. Happy birthday! What are your impressions of the last year?**

*- Hello, table hockey world! Thank you for the wishes, and thank you to all for private messages on social media. Not only for me, I think it is common for most – time is flying at an incredible pace. Years are passing by quickly. During the last year, I started my studies in an MBA program and published my autobiography book "GO For Greatness." This has been a busy and fun year with new challenges that broadened my horizons. It was also a fun year. Atis got married, and they had a great wedding! We made some nice foreign trips with my lovely wife, so overall, it was a balanced year!*

**- I've been wanting to ask for a long time. Male names in Latvia end with the letter "s". How should I pronounce your names correctly if I'm addressing you? Edgars or Edgar?**

*- My name is Edgars; however, when you refer to me and ask a question, you should say: "Hello, Edgar...". Latvian grammar is not the easiest; we also have a rich language. Thus, I wouldn't say I like the new tendency of Latvian youngsters to use so many English words in their daily lives or sometimes even speak English with each other.*

**- What are your impressions of the European Championships, which took place in Valmiera?**

*- I admire Romans Blumentals, Sandis Kalnins, and Intars Zubeckis for their enormous work organizing yet another excellent celebration for table hockey. Thanks to Sandis Krasts, Atis Silis, and Romans Falkensteins for contributing in their way to make it possible. Many thanks to the people involved because the quality of the tournament was truly outstanding. It was one of the best table hockey tournaments ever organized; I was happy to be a part of it. The sports results for our team were OK; they were not great, but they were OK.*

*Romans is already planning to apply for the World Championships 2027 in Riga! Let's see!*

**- I noticed that you don't play much in the Open Team category. Are you saving energy for the Open category?**

*- No, I never think from this perspective. Whenever my team needs me, I am ready to play. Our team has a lot of talent and can win over all the opponents without me in the round-robin. I don't need time to warm up for the deciding games; we would rather allow others to play more to have better information on who to choose as team members. I can jump in in the semifinals and finals on the spot, just like in Valmiera, where I collected eight wins and two draws in these matches.*

**- At the European Championships in Slovenia, you stood on the podium and received a gold medal in the Open Team category, but did not get into the World Ranking in this tournament because you did not play a single game for the team. Do you think it is necessary to include all players entered into the team into the World Ranking (similar to tournaments in football, hockey and other team sports)?**

*- Of course! The team consists of ten people in the Open teams and five in the nomination teams. Everyone has a role. Not just five or three people playing. Others can do scouting, be informative support about the results on nearby tables, time left, etc.*

*They can give the rest to other team members with substitutions when necessary and let them focus on the most important games ahead. A team is a team, just like you mentioned in the question.*

*Latvian player Uvis Balinskis will have his name on the Stanley Cup despite the fact he did not play a single second in the NHL finals.*

**- During the European Championship in Valmiera, I heard a lot of ideas to improve the game. What would you suggest to make table hockey more attractive, including its broadcast on TV?**

*- Broadcasts on the TV do not happen just like that. It results from hard work and financial investments from organizers. TV needs emotions (meaning at least three cameras, meaning there are at least three cameramen and a broadcast director), interviews during the breaks in the "dead moments" when the TV table is not playing, and a competent commentator to tell about the details of the game.*

*I don't see referees being involved more in the games; we have to keep the first point of the rules about the gentlemen's sport.*

*What we can do - work on the most effective way to reduce the in-and-outs.*

*The most significant improvement I can see is joining the GAISF board of non-Olympic sports federations. It will, however, have a gradual, not immediate impact. It will be a fundament to the sport to keep building later.*

*As for the game rules, there are very few games with unclear situations. It is more on a personal character playing the game than the rules. People will always find ways to argue about something.*

**- Whose game was a surprise for you at the European Championship?**

*- At the game level, I was probably most surprised by Michal Koblir. I expected an easy walk with 4-0 or 4-1 in the series, but he made me play really hard. He won against me in the first game, a little over 1 minute left I was leading 4-1, and he scored four goals in a row to win the game just a few seconds before the end. Also, in the second game, he was leading 5-3, so I got tested early on. He played a very good, diverse game.*

*The second thing - I was surprised about Rainers and his psychology. He played 55 games until the final and had the best record ever until the international champ final, 49-3-3, but then he just collapsed after losing the first two games, which could have gone to both sides.*

**- In the quarterfinals and semifinals you consistently beat the Matantsev brothers. How were these series for you?**

*Against Artjom, I needed time to adjust because the game style was different than in the previous round against Koblir. Of course, I knew it before the start, but I knew I had to be patient in the defense and not make unforced errors because he lacked a stable way to score. He does not have the "bread" yet. But when he will have a competitive centermove he can be dangerous.*

*Against the current World champion, it was, of course, tougher. He was playing well, but starting from the second game overtime, we became nervous, and his hands became "heavy". Then, game by game, I managed to win against Evgeniy. The second game was the key; if Matantsev had scored, I could have forced game seven at best. This was my first win against him, but I never struggled with confidence; it does not matter who I play against.*

*Looking forward to our next matchups!*

**- I heard that before the European Championship you played with Rainers Kalnins. Did it help in the final?**

*- It is slightly overexaggerated; we played three playoff series with Rainers on the Tuesday before the tournament because Raivis Miglinieks was away for work, and we both needed some training. And then a week before that, while Rainers was ill, I was in Incukalns, and we played two more series. That is all the training we did.*

*From a defense point of view, these series gave me a small desperation because he is quite a complete player when his mind is clear and he plays without pressure. On the attack, it helped me because I could try out different starting positions from both wings and see what was working better. But the same can be said about Rainers. On the defense, I was more aggressive with my defender and tried not to give him a puck for free. I was lucky to score so many precise combinations. These were tight games, and Rainers broke after game two. I view my second goal in the third game, where I tied the game with a three-hand combination, as the end of the series. He is a great player; he just needs more experience and better decision-making. He still needs to understand the importance of possession in deciding games.*

**- You are 35 years old. In 5 years, you and Atis will become veterans. Are you planning to play among veterans?**

*- You are scaring me now; I still feel like I am in my mid-twenties in my heart, okay?! Atis has finished playing for now. He is contributing in different ways to table hockey now, organizing the Sarauj tournament and being a member of the Latvian Table Hockey Federation board. But five years is a long period of time; I might be able to convince him to play a tournament or two later!*

*I still want to do one thing in table hockey – win the European Veteran Championships because then I would be the European Junior, Open, and Veteran champion; that would be awesome! Apart from that, I doubt I would play in veteran tournaments, except for maybe a veteran team competition. Now my fingers are not ready for real battles three days in a row.*

**- Over the past 5 years you have played in 11 tournaments. On average, a little more than two tournaments a year. It is not enough for a player of your level. What are your plans for this season?**

*- There was also a pandemic break in the middle, but yes, I do not play many tournaments anymore. I can get myself together for one annual tournament at the end of the season. However, the rest does not excite me that much anymore. I may play in the Riga Cup. I will also write an application to the municipality of Riga to finance a trip for my Laimite youngsters. I am still deciding which one, but that could be beautiful Switzerland, where October 19th is the tournament in Bern, where we could also travel around and have some nice and bright impressions! And, of course, the Umea World Championships.*

**- Thank you very much for the interview. All the best to you, your loved ones and charming Latvia. See you at “the ice arenas”.**

*- Thank you! I was really surprised and happy about the interview, and I hope you have the energy to do more interviews with exciting table hockey players!*

Mykhaylo Shalomayev