

How to Make the 2020 United States Olympic Table Tennis Team

April 18, 2019

If you've read the formal selection procedures for the 2020 Olympics, you will have seen that they are complicated and somewhat hard to understand. That's because the actual ITTF process itself is complicated and somewhat hard to understand.

So we wrote this document to help make things clearer. It doesn't discuss every detail, but hopefully helps explain how athletes can try to achieve this goal. Note that the official selection procedures are what controls, so if there's any conflict between this document and that one, the formal procedures will be followed.

Let us say one thing up front. The most likely outcome is that the U.S. will have either one or three athletes of each gender on our team (two is also a possibility). Every serious athlete wants one of these places, but most will not succeed because the supply is so limited. Of course, it's fine to try regardless of your level, up and coming athletes always have a breakthrough at some point, and so on. However, there is no more difficult prize to get, and to obtain this one will require you to perform at or above the level of the strongest competitors we have.

What We're Trying to Achieve

USATT wants to send our most capable and competitive athletes to the 2020 Olympic Games. In the recent past, USATT selected its Olympic team entirely from a domestic trial event. However, with a lack of international success, USATT has refocused its perspective to emphasize sustained competitive excellence (both international and domestic) as the guiding principle for selection.

We don't just want to show up at the Olympics, we want to become genuinely competitive there at the highest levels. The athletes who will help us achieve that goal will be those who are committed to the sport, and train and compete consistently (and well) both domestically and on the international stage.

One Simple Rule to Remember

We have only one guaranteed spot in the Olympics for one man, and one woman. If you win the 2020 USATT Olympic Games Trial or the 2020 ITTF Singles North American Qualification (these are two alternative names for the same event, see below, there will be only one trial tournament), you get that spot regardless of how many athletes are on the team, or which other aspects of the selection process come into play. Show up on February 28-March 1, 2020 and win the trial, and you will be going to Tokyo.

How the Team Qualification System Works

The International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) controls how many Olympic athletes each country can send. The maximum is three men and three women.

We can send a full team of three athletes, either men or women or both, by winning the 2019 ITTF North American Olympic Team Qualification (October 5, 2019) or through the 2020 ITTF World Team Qualification (January 21-26, 2020). The first is likely easier, because all we have to do is beat Canada in a team match. That's not to dismiss Canada, only to say that the second qualification event will include every other country in the world that doesn't have a full team yet. So we could do this either way, beating Canada or taking on a bunch of other countries for a limited number of extra team positions the ITTF will offer.

If we get to send a full team, that opens up two more positions in addition to the trial winner. Here's how to get one of these:

- A. Make the quarter finals in men's or women's singles at the 2019 World Table Tennis Championships.
- B. If fewer than two athletes make the quarters, then be the U.S. athlete with the highest adult world ranking as of February, 2020.
- C. If the third team position is still open because no one made the quarters, then have the best overall record in the following categories considering both singles and doubles:
 1. March 2020 ITTF World Ranking
 2. Results at the 2020 USATT Olympic Games Trial
 3. Results at the 2019 ITTF North American Olympic Team and 2020 ITTF World Team Qualification
 4. Competitive international competition results over the prior 12 months
 5. Results at National Ranking Tournaments over the prior 12 months
 6. Declaration of participation in future Olympic Games preparation camps and competitions and training per Section 9 of this document.

A selection committee of five (including an elite athlete representative) will review these performance criteria and identify the third team member. Athletes have asked which of these criteria will have priority. We can say that the most important factors will be your performance over the past 12 months in domestic (Trial and National Ranking Tournaments) and international competition (world ranking and results) – just as there are team spots reserved for the Trial winner and highest world-ranked athletes. Pay attention to competing in doubles, because they are important to the Team and Mixed Doubles competitions and will be considered. If the committee finds that there is a tie between two or more athletes, the Trial will serve as the tie-breaker. We expect that the individual (one only) male and female athletes selected will be among the top few in the majority of the criteria above. You can track your progress that way.

How to Qualify for an Extra Position on the U.S. Olympic Team

This is where it starts to get more complicated. If we don't earn a full team by beating Canada or winning in the 2020 ITTF World Team Qualification event, then there's still a chance to get more than one athlete into the Olympics – through singles, or mixed doubles.

Let's discuss singles here. Just as the ITTF will have a final qualification tournament for teams, it will do the same for singles on May 19-24, 2020. Each country that has not qualified a team will get to send one athlete to this tournament, which will have a limited number of spots to award. If an athlete wins a place in the Olympics this way, he or she joins the U.S. team to Tokyo.

The U.S. representative will be chosen this way:

1. The highest-world ranked player as of February, 2020, if he or she did not win the 2020 ITTF Singles North American Qualification.
2. If the highest world-ranked player did win the Qualification, then the selection committee will choose another representative through the criteria and process already discussed above.

As with the team selections, this final singles qualification chance will be distinct for men and for women. For example, if we had already qualified a full women's team but not a men's team, then we could send one male athlete to this event.

A Note About the Olympic Trial

We mentioned both a 2020 USATT Olympic Games Trial, and a 2020 ITTF Singles North American Qualification. This can be confusing. The answer is that they refer to the same event that will be given one name, or the other.

If the U.S. gets a full team to the Olympics, then the event will be the 2020 USATT Olympic Games Trial.

However, if the U.S. does not get a full team to the Olympics, then the *same event* will become the 2020 ITTF Singles North American Qualification. This is because the one position in the Olympics we are guaranteed for an athlete is really a North American position, not one belonging to our country alone. However, in that case the Canadians won't compete in this trial because they will have already filled up their team with three athletes.

Either way, our trial will only include U.S. athletes.

Mixed Doubles

We're happy that Mixed Doubles was added to the Olympics. However, the way to qualify for it is not simple at all. Each country can potentially enter one team of one man and one woman.

To begin with, every Mixed Doubles team has to win its way into the event. Just because a country qualifies athletes to the Olympics in other ways doesn't mean they get to play Mixed Doubles automatically. Another complication is that no country can send more than three men or three women to the Olympics; so a country that already has a full team of three athletes must select its Mixed Doubles competitors from among those three.

Our Mixed Doubles competitors will be chosen by the selection committee – either from the teams of three men or women if we already have qualified them, or from any eligible athletes if we have not qualified a full team for that gender. There will be multiple opportunities for the U.S. to qualify, and the ITTF has ranked them in order of priority. So for example, the highest priority is the 2020 ITTF North American Mixed Doubles Qualification, and a U.S. team that wins there will definitely go to Tokyo – even if, say, another U.S. team had made it far enough in the 2019 ITTF World Tour Grand Finals to qualify. We've listed these competitions in order of priority here, and note that the competition that will occur first on the calendar is not the highest priority:

1. 2020 ITTF North American Mixed Doubles Qualification: We can enter two teams, and Canada can enter two teams. The winning team qualifies. February 26, 2020, in Markham, Ontario, Canada.
2. If we didn't qualify through (1) above: 2019 ITTF World Tour Grand Finals: Finish in one of the top four places in Mixed Doubles in this event; athletes must qualify for this event through performance in the 2019 ITTF World Tour, which are open events. December 12-15, 2019.
3. If we didn't qualify through (1) or (2) above: There will be designated ITTF World Tour events in 2020 that will offer a limited number of Mixed Doubles spots. These are open events.

Once at the Olympics, Who Competes in Which Events?

In the Olympics, there are three events to be played: Team, Singles, and Mixed Doubles.

If we send a full team of three, all team members will play in the Team event. We are allowed two athletes in the Singles event, and they will be chosen by the selection committee. If we qualify a Mixed Doubles team, those athletes will compete in that event.

Olympic Games Selection Committee

High Performance Director, USA Table Tennis
Chair of the High Performance Committee, USA Table Tennis
Two National Team Coaches, USA Table Tennis
One Athlete Representative, USA Table Tennis

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