

PPA Nationals: Progress, Perspective & No More Qualifying

Cary, North Carolina | Labor Day Week 2026

Good afternoon! Hope everyone had a great Labor Day weekend.

First off, thank you so much for following along and supporting me this past week. You all are a huge motivator for me - apparently just enough motivation to get me outside and running in this heat.

Last week was PPA Nationals in Cary, North Carolina, and it was a long, hot, challenging, but encouraging week.



A little lake time before heading to Cary.

A Weekend with 11SIX24

I flew out a couple days early to spend the weekend with the 11SIX24 crew. I got to hang out with the owners, Dekel and Will, spend some time on the lake, and get a little training in.

The more time I spend around 11SIX24, the more I appreciate being part of the team. They're just really good people who genuinely want to help their athletes achieve their goals. That's something I don't take for granted.

For probably the first time ever, I did not practice the day before a tournament. I knew I needed rest more than reps. I am learning more and more about what my body needs, and sometimes playing more pickleball is not the answer.

The Ranking Battle

WPR combines all three disciplines into one overall ranking: 50% gender doubles, 35% mixed doubles and only 15% singles. As a singles guy, that does not exactly help me.

My WPR was around 115 heading into Nationals, which meant I had to qualify in singles and mixed. Ivan and I had enough points to go directly into the men's doubles main draw.

THE GOAL: NO MORE QUALIFYING.

Qualifying Day: Survive & Advance

I got to the site at 6:30 a.m., warmed up around 7:00, and because of a software issue my first match did not get put on until around 11:00.

Then I played basically everything back-to-back: four matches total, two singles qualifiers and two mixed qualifiers. Thankfully, I got through all four and punched my ticket into both main draws.

For mixed, I played with Naomi Nguyen from Phoenix in our first tournament together. We won our first round and then snuck out a tough three-game match to qualify.

Qualifying took a lot out of me, so afterward I got an IV treatment and tried to get my body back on track for the main draw.

Big Wins, Tough Lessons

Singles: Jack Sock

I knew going into the match that I needed to stay locked in. Jack plays with a lot of antics and can get you caught up in the way he plays the match. He will look like he is barely trying on one point and then string together several really high-level shots.

My goal was to ignore all of that and stay all business. I felt like I was able to dictate the majority of the points, move him around, and eventually wear him down.

GOT THE WIN.

One stat I'm taking with me for confidence: I've now beaten 5 of the top 10 singles players in the world over the last six months. That gives me a lot of confidence about where my singles game is heading.

Mixed Doubles on Championship Court

Naomi and I got to play on Championship Court on Prime Video against the #2 team in the world, Hayden Patriquin and Anna Bright.

They beat us 11-3, 11-1. Looking back, I do not think I moved enough or took enough chances. Against a team that good, playing safe is not going to get it done. I need to be willing to play bigger and create opportunities, even when those opportunities do not seem obvious.

Men's Doubles: Finding a Way

Ivan was coming off a brutal 13-11 third-game loss where they had been up 10-7, so understandably his head was not exactly in a great place.

We played Zane Ford and Grayson Goldin - two singles guys who were ripping balls and sending full bags from the kitchen line. We did not play with much energy, but we played just well enough to find a way through in three.

Sometimes you just have to survive and advance.

Day 3: One of My Best Singles Matches

I played Augie Ge next in singles, and I thought it was one of the most complete matches I have played so far. Mentally, physically, and execution-wise, I felt really good.

I did not feel like he had enough weapons to consistently hurt me, and I was able to play big enough to control most of the match. Another win and into the Round of 16.

A Step Back in Doubles

Men's doubles against Noe Khlif and Eric Oncins was probably my worst match of the week. They did a good job picking on me, especially in the dink game.

We did not communicate well, and overall it felt like a step backward. Sitting on the bench for most of the MLP summer probably did not do my doubles game any favors. There is a difference between practicing doubles and playing meaningful matches under pressure. I need more of the latter.

A Match I Still Like

Tama Shimabukuro

Day 4, I played Tama in the singles Round of 16. Going into the match, I really liked the matchup. Honestly, I still do.

But I just did not feel great out there. My legs were heavy, I could not breathe as well as I wanted, and mentally I was not as present as I had been earlier in the week.

Maybe it was four straight days of playing in brutal heat. Maybe some of it was the pressure of the moment. Probably a combination. Because I was tired, I felt like I needed to play bigger than normal. I did not want long points and did not want to chase down extra balls, which led to me missing targets I normally make.

Nothing to take away from Tama - he is obviously really good. He is deceptive and plays differently than almost everyone else. He holds the ball just long enough to freeze you, mixes in a quality short drop volley with a deep volley that pushes you backward, and consistently keeps his serve and return deep.

His ball is also a lot "heavier" than it looks.

I STILL HAD CHANCES. I CAN GET HIM NEXT TIME.

What I Learned

The biggest takeaway from the week? Fitness. Fitness. Fitness.

I need to continue improving my conditioning so that late in tournaments I can focus entirely on strategy and execution. Losing because of fitness cannot happen. That is controllable.

In doubles, I need to play to my strengths more - looking to speed the ball up off the bounce when it is there, while also being disciplined enough to hit neutral dinks over and over when that is what the point requires.

In singles, the biggest areas I am working on are my midcourt transition ball and getting my first volley deeper in the court.

The encouraging part is that my baseline-to-baseline ball was probably the best I have ever hit it. Now I need to maintain that same quality once my opponent gets to the net.



Tournament-week fuel: not always glamorous.

Keep Climbing

Arizona & Grand Rapids

Arizona Open is next week. After that, if I am not playing into the weekend, the plan is to head to the Grand Rapids Challenger.

The goal is simple: keep accumulating points, climb the rankings, and put myself in a position where I am automatically in these main draws.

NO MORE QUALIFYING.

I am excited about where my game is going. I know exactly what I need to improve, and I also know I am capable of beating the players I need to beat. Now it is about doing it consistently, deeper into tournaments.



The glamorous side of tour life.

Trusting the Process

God is so good - always.

Through this process, He continues to teach me so much. There have been plenty of moments where I have wanted things to happen faster, but I have more confidence than ever that a breakthrough is near.

He's willing, and I'm trusting His timing.

Every one of you has impacted this journey in some capacity, and I am truly thankful that I still get to chase this. The support you give me is part of what makes it possible.

If someone comes to mind who loves pickleball, wants the inside scoop on life on tour, or simply wants to follow the journey, send them my way:

BARLOWPICKLEBALL.COM

Thank you again for believing in me and being part of this. Stay tuned - we are getting closer.

Matthew