

Spinning the ball

Syracuse table tennis club pits against each other players of different ages, abilities and styles

Story by Christopher Karadjov • Photos by Michael Larson

Super Bowl Sunday is business as usual at Kiesewetter Recreation Center in Syracuse. In the late afternoon, members of Syracuse Table Tennis Club are getting busy on eight tables in the well-lit gym looping, chopping, smashing or otherwise punishing the 40-millimeter ball.

A few are sitting in the bleachers, visibly exhausted, waiting for their turn, drinking Gatorade, munching on PowerBars, wiping themselves with towels. A player is changing the rubber on his blade, splashing glue from a can with a brand name you won't find at Home Depot. Another is flipping the pages of a table tennis equipment catalog. Yet another player is returning from a practice with the table tennis robot, a machine capable of throwing up to 90 balls a minute at its human opponent.

Occasionally, clapping from the bleachers rewards a particularly tenacious save or a spectacularly long rally on the gym floor.

It looks, feels and smells like a competitive spectator sport, not the game you may have played in your dad's basement. When told of a recent Associated Press story that referred to table tennis as "a niche game," several STTC players become irritated: Don't

call it a game, and don't call it ping-pong, either.

"The difference between ping-pong, the game, and table tennis, the sport, is in the equipment, which allows you to play with tremendous amount of spin and speed," says Mike Halliday, STTC president. He adds that the switch from the pastime of many Americans in fire stations, schools or basements to the modern Olympic sport can be quite a wake-up call.

Anthony Washer, a SUNY Oswego sophomore who has played ping-pong before, agrees. "I got clobbered when I first showed up in the club a month ago," he says. "I beat some, but I got beaten a lot. I am getting better."

A club like this is a natural mix of players of different skill level. Some exhibit well grooved, professional-style moves, and some are clearly making their first steps in the sport. Yet table tennis seems to be an unsurpassed leveler. Players say that refusing a match to someone of lesser skills is considered contrary to good sportsmanship. Club competitions routinely pit against each other players of different ages and styles.

"The better ones will win most of the times, but nobody gives up without a good fight. You learn from a challenge," says Halliday.

Table tennis is also one of the few sports that allow wheelchair-bound players to compete directly against able-bodied peers, because neither the equipment, nor to the rules require any modification to accommodate disabled athletes.

When 6-year-old Darian Karadjov challenges 56-year-old Kent Hogan to a game on a club Sunday, no Olympic medals are at stake, yet their pairing on the opposite sides of the net symbolizes the variety of this sport.

Hogan is a paraplegic, who suffered a spinal cord injury in a motorcycle accident some 34 years ago. He has had his ups and downs since then, but he says he kept playing sports as much as he could. Hogan has been inducted into the National Wheelchair Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs in basketball, table tennis and swimming.

In 1978, Hogan won the silver in table tennis doubles at the

Pan-American Games in Caracas, Venezuela. He developed a heart condition later, and was gravely ill until 1998. Recovering slowly, Hogan has come back to table tennis, helped by a pacemaker since March 2004.

He says contrary to what one may expect, able-bodied players are not cutting him any slack. "Once they overcome the initial shock, they play against me to their best, especially in tournaments," Hogan says. "I enjoy that, because it stimulates me to be at

traded seven to nine shots over the net.

A tough match normally leaves the participants soaked with sweat, hardly able to catch their breath. Nobody seems to complain, and even the 60-something-year-olds in the club keep up. "It's the ultimate exercise, and it is fun, too," Weeks says. "You play, take some rest, then play again."

Adds Lauro, "It is second best only to dancing."

Table tennis is not a game reserved for AARP-members, though. A slew of



Kent Hogan (right) blocks one into the net after a backspin serve by Rudy Lauro. Hogan, 56, won silver at the 1987 Pan-American Games for disabled in Caracas, Venezuela.

the top of my game, too."

Mike Halliday himself was introduced to the sport by a wheelchair-bound player while in college. Says Halliday: "His name was Billy Reiss. We ended up renting an apartment together, and played every day in the living room. We had no other furniture, just a ping-pong table."

Reiss taught Halliday all about blades, rubbers, showed him fancy serves and fast blocks. "I thought I was good until I started playing Billy," Halliday says. "He would make you pay if you treated him like a disabled in table tennis. He was very good moving the ball around."

About half of the best players in the club are over 50, proving that table tennis is truly a sport for life. Some of the aficionados are even better-aged.

Rudy Lauro, who is turning 70 in a few months, says of table tennis, "I love it, I love to move around, exercise, keep my shape in garish condition."

An avid dancer, Lauro is skillful with the paddle, imparting backward spin on the ball (with a shot called chop), which makes returning the ball over the net quite a non-trivial task.

Another proficient chopper, Dorsey Weeks, 65, is renowned for his ability to return his opponents hardest smashes back to the table from 20 feet away. No small feat, considering the fact that a good hit sends the ball flying at some 60 m.p.h. To appreciate the speed of this sport, novices are often told that in the same time it takes a baseball from a professional-level pitcher to reach the batter, table tennis players may have

younger players have joined the club recently. Some are students, some are professionals. Besides locals, club players have come from Taiwan, China, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Hungary and Mexico, underscoring the fact that table tennis is the second most popular sport in the world after soccer.

Most STTC members participate in tournaments. Some say they traveled as far as Baltimore and Chicago in 2004 to play at nation-wide venues. The club is having at least three or four open competitions each year, on occasions drawing stars such as Mark Hazinski of South Bend, Ind., a 2004 U.S. Olympic team member.

Syracuse TTC also plays at the Bova Community Center in Schiller Park on Thursdays. As a part of the club's drive to make table tennis more popular, its members hold there special training sessions for children, which attract a fair number of local kids. Most of them are exposed to the sport for the first time. Several events every year are specially designed for kids and teenagers, such as the 2005 City of Syracuse Junior Championships in March.

Those who come to the club once usually get hooked, even if they have not tried table tennis before, Halliday says. If anything else, Halliday and the rest of the club executives have trouble shepherding the players out of Kiesewetter gym on time before a crowd of basketball players starts coming in at 7 p.m.

Says Hogan: "I am amazed how fast the time goes on Sundays. I miss it until the next week."



Rudy Lauro is chopping the ball back. Lauro, 69, is a regular participant at the New York Senior Games.