

The New York Times

June 2, 2011

The Little-White-Ball Obsession That Isn't Golf

By THOMAS LIN



NOW that the glitterati, literati, digerati and hipsterati have been caught in the act of Ping-Pong, let's be clear: There is Ping-Pong, and there is table tennis. "Everybody I meet either knows somebody or they themselves were at one point a terrific Ping-Pong player," said Marty Reisman, 81, the 1958 and 1960 United States Open table tennis champion. "Only a small group is cognizant of the extreme skill required to play the game."

What casual players call Ping-Pong (probably not even realizing that that is a trademark) is the ultimate basement sport, requiring mongooselike reflexes, unflinching hand-eye coordination and deodorant. At its most basic level anyone can play anywhere — from tiny novelty sets atop coffee tables to outdoor tables at Bryant and Tompkins Square Parks. Ping-Pong is indifferent to the player's size, age or station. During a diplomatic tour of Europe last week President Obama joined Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain for an impromptu game of doubles, losing to two 16-year-old students. But become good enough, and you're playing table tennis, not Ping-Pong; same basic game, vastly different skill set.

While Ping-Pong is herky-jerky — players lurch laterally like the paddles in the old arcade game Pong — table tennis requires practiced technique and a chesslike strategic artistry. Pongers often start with the easy bounce-then-hit serve — as verboten as a double dribble in basketball — and graduate to faster regulation serves, while table tennis phenoms shape almost unreturnable serves by concealing directionality and maximizing spin. Most Ping-Pongers still play the traditional

game-to-21, alternating service every 5 points. The International Table Tennis Federation switched in 2001 to game-to-11, changing serves every 2 points, to attract more television viewers in [Asia](#) and Europe.

Wang Chen, a quarterfinalist at the 2008 Olympics and currently the highest rated player in New York City, said beginners often think they're playing tennis, with wide backswings and over-the-shoulder follow-throughs. "In table tennis the forehand stops in front of your face," she said. "You have to start the backhand from the middle" of the body.

Becoming a table tennis expert requires talent and years of training. But visits to some of the city's playing spots revealed a number of strategies to help newcomers raise their game.

WORK HARD, PLAY HARD Two years ago Tony Cheng, a struggling actor always on the lookout for free activities, came across Bryant Park's newly installed tables. His first time out he felt bad watching his opponent fetch ball after errant ball, he said, adding, "It's a little dinky ball, and you just tap it, and it's all over the place."

That night he scoured the Internet for table tennis videos. He tried the pen grip, instead of the more popular shake-hand, because he saw some top Chinese players using it: "If I'm going to learn, I'm going to learn from the best." Then he played — a lot. For two summers he put in six hours almost every weekday, sometimes until the park closed. He is now one of the better regulars there, with a game well adapted to the vagaries of outdoor Ping-Pong.

Throwing down one of his thundering smashes recently, he let out a primal scream. "I'm an entertainer, so I do it for fun," he said. "Sometimes I sound like Bruce Lee."

BRING THE TRASH TALK Under a low-hanging light and boxed in by pool tables, two men stood opposite each other punishing a delicate white ball. "You want to give up now, or you want to play the game?" asked Greg Hunt, 53, owner of the establishment, Amsterdam Billiards in the East Village.

"You've got to beat me into submission," said Foster Stevenson, 52, a part-time manager there.

"We haven't even started playing yet, and I'm breaking a sweat," Mr. Hunt said. He estimated that 5 percent of his customers request table tennis, up from about 1 percent three years ago.

Mr. Stevenson added: "For a pool hall, people are really into it here. Sometimes they get upset because they can't get a table."

The two friends regularly play basketball, but this was their first Ping-Pong encounter.

"The fact that I have more reach should give me the advantage," Mr. Hunt said before the game. "I tend to be more aggressive than I should, so I'll miss a lot of smashes."

He attacked as promised. Mr. Stevenson defended with his speedy reflexes. In the end, the owner prevailed, 22-20.

REMEMBER YOUR DANCE MOVES At Spin New York, the high-profile club whose founders include the actress Susan Sarandon, dating couples, bar-hopping young professionals and families with children send Ping-Pong balls streaking like bullets in “The Matrix.” But at the table near the bar, surrounded by low aluminum bleachers, an orderly rhythm rises from the din.

That showcase table is for high-level athletes like Dora Kurimay and Dr. De Cong Tran, who recently faced each other there. Dr. Tran, 48, a member of the 2003 United States national team, said before the best-of-three match: “She smiles a lot. It distracts people.”

Ms. Kurimay, 29, a former under-14 European champion from Hungary, said smiling helps her cope with stress. While serving she often stamps her foot like a matador. She bounces between points to stay loose and focused. “Table tennis is almost like dancing,” she said. “Everything is about balance and how you move.”

A podiatrist and amateur ballroom dancer, Dr. Tran said, “If you’re legs don’t support you, your upper body can’t have power.”

TAKE IT SLOW If all else fails, slow the ball and kill the spin by using simpler paddles.

Modern table tennis paddles have a spongy layer under the sticky rubber that makes contact with the ball, which can give shots tremendous power and spin. Mr. Reisman, an advocate of the classic hardbat — with pips-out rubber and no sponge — who incredibly won the United States Hardbat Championships at 67, called the resulting type of game “more within the scope of human ability.”

“The sponge is a powerful kind of weapon,” he added. “You almost have to be freakish to play it on that high level.”

His advice is to work at keeping the ball in play rather than going for spectacular smashes. “In order for the game to succeed on a personal competitive level, you’ve got to have a dialog between two players that a child could understand,” he said.

And it doesn’t matter if you play in sneakers or Jimmy Choo stilettos: you’re never going to seem slick. Ms. Sarandon made no apologies about the game’s image. “It’s cool to be geeky,” she said. “And sports don’t get much geekier than Ping-Pong.”

Places to Play, Inside and Out

Public parks with free tables:

BRYANT PARK Avenue of the Americas, between 41st and 42nd Streets; (212) 768-4242, bryantpark.org.

GULICK PARK Delancey Street, between Bialystoker Place and Abraham Kazan Street, Lower East Side; gulickpark.org.

TOMPKINS SQUARE PARK Avenues A to B, between East 7th and 10th Streets, East Village; nycgovparks.org/parks/tompkinssquarepark.

Bars that have tables:

AMSTERDAM BILLIARDS 110 East 11th Street, East Village; (212) 995-0333, amsterdambilliardclub.com.

FAT CAT 75 Christopher Street, at Seventh Avenue, Greenwich Village; (212) 675-6056, fatcatmusic.org.

IONA 180 Grand Street, at Bedford Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 384-5008, ionabrooklyn.com.

RISQUE BILLIARDS 213 McGuinness Boulevard, between Greenpoint Avenue and Calyer Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn; (718) 349-1445.

SLATE 54 West 21st Street, Manhattan; (212) 989-0096, slate-ny.com.

Clubs that rent tables to nonmembers:

BROOKLYN TABLE TENNIS CLUB 1100 Coney Island Avenue, between Foster Avenue and Avenue H; (718) 421-2200, nisonsttc.com.

NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL TABLE TENNIS CENTER 134-32 35th Avenue, Flushing, Queens; (718) 961-4208, nyittc.com.

NEW YORK TABLE TENNIS CLUB 35-26 Prince Street, Flushing, Queens; (718) 359-3272, nyttc.com.

NEW YORK TABLE TENNIS FOUNDATION 384 Broadway, between Walker and White Streets, lower level, Chinatown; (646) 772-2922, nyttf.com.

SPIN NEW YORK 48 East 23rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 982-8802, spinyc.com.

WANG CHEN'S TABLE TENNIS CLUB 250 West 100th Street, Manhattan; (212) 864-7253, wangchenttc.com.