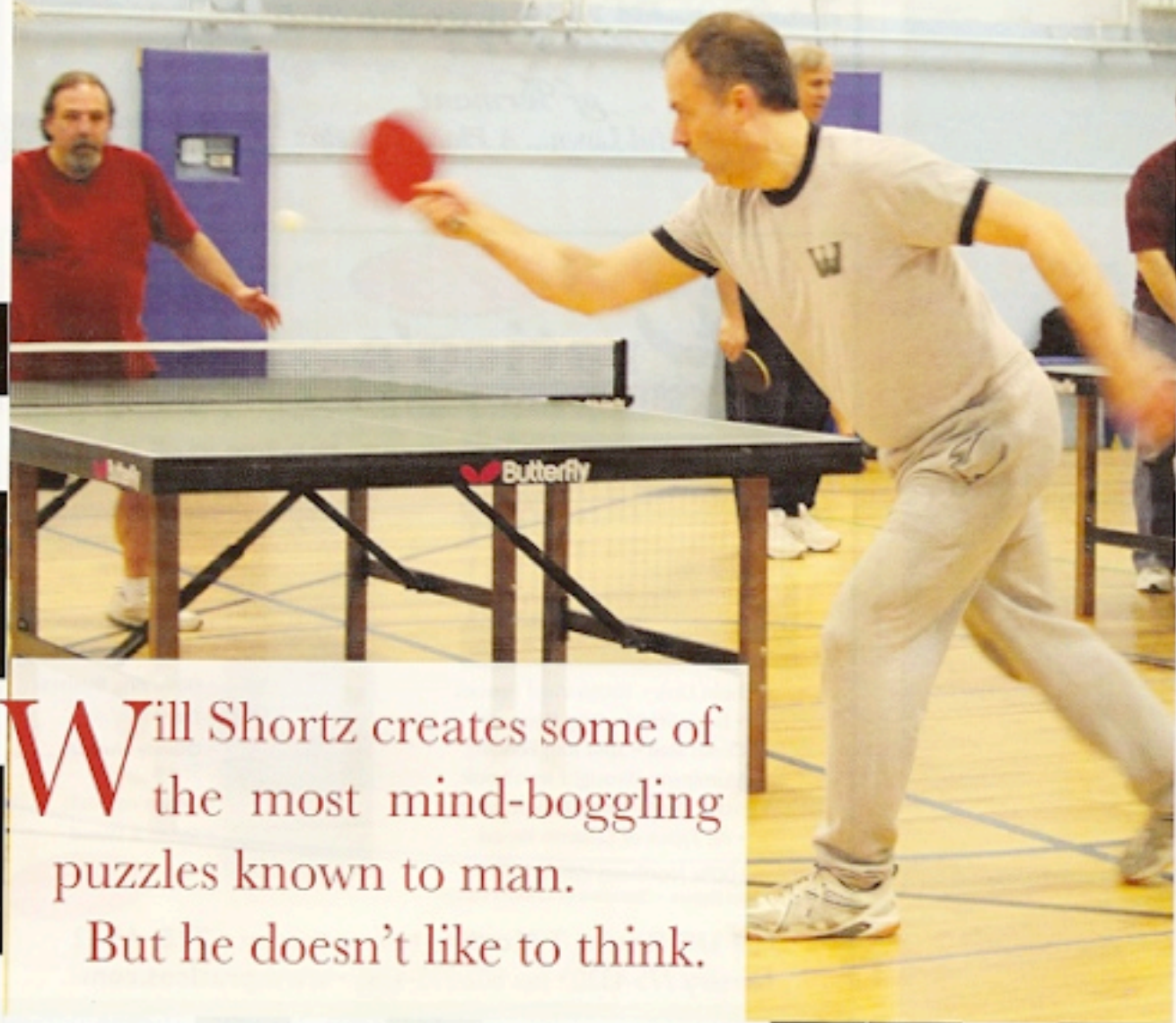


WILL SHORTZ

NY Times Puzzler and Table Tennis Maven

BY Paul Post • PHOTOS BY Jill Leake



Will Shortz creates some of the most mind-boggling puzzles known to man.

But he doesn't like to think.



Will Shortz joins the Green Mountain Table Tennis Club in Rutland for some sport.



Not when pursuing his favorite pastime — table tennis — that combines lightning-fast reflexes with razor-sharp cunning and mental dexterity.

"There are lots of things I like about it," he said. "It's a very fast-paced game. It's been said that table tennis is like chess on speed. I love the geometry of the game, I like that it's year round and that it's for all ages. You can be very good when you're eight, nine or 10 and still be very good into your 80s."

Shortz, of Westchester County, New York, is one of the sport's greatest ambassadors. To him, that's exactly what it is — a sport.

"I say ping pong is the game. Table tennis is the sport," he said. "Table tennis is the second-most played sport in the world, after soccer. It's been an Olympic sport since 1988. It's a question of your skill level and your mindset, how you approach it. At the highest level, table tennis is very athletic, very strenuous."

But that's just the half of it.

"There's a lot of mental strategy in table tennis," Shortz said. "When you're training you want to train your body to react instinctively to certain shots and certain spins, so that when you're in a match you're plotting strategy based on your opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Once you're good you shouldn't have to think how to react to a shot. That should come naturally. You should be thinking about how you can beat your opponent."

Shortz, the *New York Times* crossword puzzle editor, recently visited the Green Mountain Table Tennis Club that plays at 7 p.m. each Tuesday at the Knights of Columbus hall, 21 Merchants Row in

Rutland.

One of his many goals is to play in at least one club in every state in the nation.

"This is the 144th U.S. club that I've played in along with 33 clubs in other countries," he said. "Basically, wherever I travel I look up a local club and play. Last May, I was in Beijing and got to play in a couple of Chinese clubs. There's a former world champion from Belarus named Vladimir Samsonov. I played at his club in Minsk."

Shortz is so enamored with the sport that he recently opened the largest table tennis center in the country, near his Pleasant Valley, New York home. Shortz owns the facility while his good friend, three-time Caribbean champion Robert Roberts of Barbados, is its director.

"In 2001, I found a club near me, just north of New York City where I was living and started playing twice a week, then three or four times. I became the director. Robert actually planted the idea in my



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mind. He said, "What would you think about having a center dedicated to table tennis?"

"I said, 'That's a ridiculous idea. There's no way it's going to work because property in Westchester County is too expensive. But we started looking for properties and after a year we found the perfect spot. It happens to be five blocks from my house.'"

The 13,000-square foot facility has 23-foot high ceilings and 18 world-class tables from China, where table tennis is a national obsession. "In the 1950s, Mao Tse-tung wanted China to advance to the highest level in some sport, and it was his feeling that table tennis was a sport that China could excel in," Shortz said. "Of course, China is a huge country and it's a relatively inexpensive sport. That helps if you're an emerging country. They start kids at six, seven and eight. If you're good enough when you're eight then you advance to a regional school where you'll play table tennis more. Then you'll advance to another level. By the time you're 13 or 14 if you're not a top player then you're not good enough any more."

Shortz, 59, has no illusions about becoming a world champion himself.

"But I'd like to be national champion for my age," he said.

The Local Club

The Green Mountain Table Tennis Club, which started out in Brandon, is now celebrating its 30th anniversary. "We've got 25 to 35 active members who play at any given time," founder and President Ron Lewis said. "One of the best things is that it's played indoors, so you can play at any time of year regardless of the weather. And it's open to both sexes, any age."

"I wanted to find an individual sport," said 22-year-old Justin Perkins of Rutland. "That's what I like about it. It's a nice competitive game. Plus it's a great workout. It's a lot different than basement ping pong. Table tennis and ping pong are two different games."

His brother, Brian, 25, is one of the top five players in Vermont.

"We play all over the Northeast, eight to 10 tournaments per year," he said.

Shortz's visit inspired Rutland area players to reach new heights and opened their eyes to new possibilities of their own. He got started the same as most people.

"My family had a ping pong table in our recreation room when I was a kid, so I played a lot," Shortz said. "I won some trophies when I was in middle school and high school. I played up until about 1986 when I got busy with life. But I always remembered that table tennis was one of my passions, even when I wasn't playing."

When not playing, Shortz was hard at work becoming one of the world's foremost puzzle creators. He's authored more than 400 books and owns the world's largest library of puzzle books and magazines. This spring, the Association of Game & Puzzle Collectors honored him with its prestigious Sam Loyd Award, given annually to an individual who, as an entrepreneur, has been responsible for the promotion of the interest in mechanical puzzles.

Using an independent study program, Shortz developed his own college curriculum at Indiana University and was the first person ever to graduate with a degree in enigmatology — the study of puzzles.



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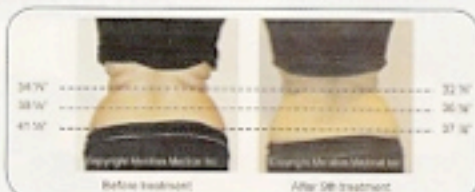
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"I started making puzzles when I was eight or nine," he said. "I sold my first one when I was 14. I became a regular contributor to Dell puzzle magazines when I was 16. In college I took courses on how to create crossword puzzles, the history of puzzles of all sorts — word puzzles, math puzzles, the psychology of puzzles.

"My thesis was on the history of American word puzzles before 1860. I spent literally an entire year at the Indiana University library poring over old newspapers, books, microfilm, microform — looking up everything I could find on puzzles. I found puzzles in the U.S. all the way back to 1647 in one of the earliest publications in the colonies. That's my first passion really and it's a good thing because I'm a lot better at puzzles than I am at table tennis," Shortz said, smiling.

Aside from personal rankings, there is one more goal he'd like to achieve.

"President Obama plays a little table tennis," he said. "There was a picture of him and Prime Minister Cameron in England last year when they got together. They played some top players from Britain."

Some day, he'd like to square off against the Commander in Chief, too.

"Of course, that would be very cool," Shortz said.

For information about Green Mountain Table Tennis Club go to: www.gmttc.com

Paul Post is a reporter in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. and has written for numerous sports, business, travel and regional publications. His third book, Soldiers of Saratoga County: From Concord to Kabul (History Press), was released in 2010.



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