

## Champlain Volley

Serving up table tennis in Shelburne

By Sarah Tuff [04.20.11]

When I hear about the Friday-night Ping-Pong action at the Shelburne Old Town School, I'm game. After all, in my twenties — before my married-with-two-kids life — I had passed countless hours tossing little hollow balls into paper cups. Games of beer pong provided major bonding time for my five brothers and me.

But when I arrive at 6:30 p.m. on a recent Friday, there's no beer in sight. No beverages at all, actually, unless you count the bottles of water stashed in gear bags. And, instead of laughter and shouting, the only sounds are squeaking sneakers, score calls and the *pick-pock* of volleys around several tables. Seriously focused guys clad in gym shorts and T-shirts are whacking the hell out of their balls. No way am I going to intrude in my Chuck Taylor sneakers and True Religion jeans.

Clearly, this is not the basement version of Ping-Pong that many of us grew up playing. And the players don't even call it Ping-Pong — the Parker Brothers registered that trademark decades ago. Besides, Ping-Pong sounds, well, like a basement game. This is the Champlain Valley Table Tennis Club (CVTTC), and its members are preparing for the Albert D. DeVine Memorial State Championships on April 23. Players from around the state, including from Rutland's very strong Green Mountain Table Tennis Club (GMTTC) — which had its own tournament in March — will play in a giant round-robin, where state titles and trophies will be doled out. The tourney will also serve as the table-tennis portion of the Vermont Senior Games, a season of 25 events and hundreds of aging athletes vying for a spot at the National Senior Games, or the Senior Olympics.

And why not? These guys are *good*. The Champlain Valley group is also growing, as evidenced by the extra tables being wheeled out tonight, and the accents reveal Bosnian, Estonian and Ghanaian members alongside the native New Englanders. As many as 25 players congregate here on Friday nights; several of them also play in Burlington's Old North End at the Miller Center on Monday nights. Says Albert's son, Jack DeVine, "We've had a very good year."

Jack DeVine was one of the CVTTC's founding members in 1980. He was inspired in part by watching his semi-pro dad, who won multiple National Senior Games medals in the sport before he died in 2009 at age 92. "Dad and I played when I was a kid; we had a drop-leaf table in the dining room," recalls DeVine, who lives in Ferrisburgh. The table-tennis club played in that town's Union Meeting Hall for some 15 years, he says, then bounced around a bit before landing here in Shelburne. Meanwhile the GMTTC has also been playing table tennis around the state for 30 years and has 46 tournaments under its belt. That club's president, Ronald Lewis, reports that there are also active groups in Barre, Norwich and Windsor.

"It's very competitive," Ken Lynn of Essex tells me as he stands by waiting to jump into a game of

singles or doubles. “Everybody’s got a different style.”

Lynn points out Jim Hayford Jr., a six-time state champion who, at age 74, has his much younger opponent scrambling all around the table.

“I play a game that’s very economical; I try not to move too much,” Hayford explains when he finally takes a break. The last time he whopped everybody in Vermont, in 1996, he’d just had open-heart surgery and, after five stints and a defibrillator, his chest still bothers him sometimes. Hence his strategy of making the other guy move.

Growing up in the Northeast Kingdom, Hayford says, he played on a plywood table with cheap balls and sandpaper paddles. Today, his paddle, or “blade,” like most everybody else’s here, is as pricey as a tennis racquet. “It has two surfaces,” Hayford explains, showing me one side that’s rubbery smooth and the other stippled with bumps. “These are the long pips, which gives a knuckleball back, for topspin,” he says.

Bruce Kline, another CVTTC cofounder and the current club president, keeps his blade in a special case that pumps air, pressurizing the foam to add more speed to the ball. “We’re real gearheads when it comes to the racquets,” Kline says. “It makes for a fast game. It’s very physical — you have to be able to move your legs. You have to have good reflexes, good hand-eye coordination. You’d think it was your upper body doing the work, but it’s really the legs.”

To train for table tennis, DeVine does footwork drills and lifts weights; he also has a ball-shooting robot that he plays against at home. Hayford, meanwhile, has erected his own table-tennis outbuilding in the backyard of his Burlington residence.

Around the Shelburne gym, where players range from college-age kids to septuagenarians, tennis sneakers are the footwear of choice, except for Bennicent Agbodzie — he’s barefooted in the match he loses to Asmir Barucic, who moved here from Bosnia. Agbodzie, I learn, played table tennis professionally in Ghana, traveling to competitions in Nigeria, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal, and winning some money along with products. “It has been a long time since I’ve played,” he says. “But I like the competitiveness. I like that it’s one person who plays at a time, then I just have myself to blame for all the things that went wrong.”

Agbodzie does not seem flustered by his losses this evening. “I’m gonna keep playing until I can beat everybody here,” he vows.

Hank Buding, originally from Estonia, now makes the 65-mile trip from Redford, N.Y., to play here every Friday. “Nobody likes to lose,” he says. “It’s very hard, especially if you’re used to winning. Jim [Hayford] and I used to play doubles, and nobody could touch us for a couple of years. Now we can’t touch anybody.”

Like Hayford, Buding is 74, and should be a top contender for hardware at the Vermont Senior Games.

As I look around the Shelburne gym, I think I might have a shot at some sort of state title, even if I haven’t played table tennis in years. That’s because I’m the only woman here, and everyone is stumped when I ask about the last time a female player was on the scene in Shelburne. (Though there are a couple of competitive women in the GMTTC.)

Encouraged, I allow DeVine to talk me into a short rally at one of the tables. “I’ve got a hundred and fifty bucks in this paddle,” he says, lending me a racquet with a friendly warning. “So don’t hit it against the table.”

Even in my jeans and decidedly noncompetitive footwear, I manage to keep the ball in play, though I can tell DeVine is trying not to laugh at my easy lobs.

“What am I doing that’s so amateur?” I ask.

DeVine steps to my side of the table, demonstrating a better grip that will help me hit the ball at a better angle. Just for fun, I ask him to show me how he’d typically play in a game, and am instantly humbled by the whizzing whirr of white. I’d have to practice a heck of a lot more to not embarrass myself. Still, it’s a good time, even without the beer.

“I like the camaraderie,” says DeVine. “We’ve been doing this for 31 years. We go out to the table and we try to beat the shit out of each other, but afterward we shake hands and we’re friends again.”

*Got a comment on this story or a suggestion for another one? Contact Sarah Tuff at [tuff@sevendaysvt.com](mailto:tuff@sevendaysvt.com).*

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