

The Other Indoor Sport: Table Tennis in Vermont

**By Ronald Lewis, Founder & President of the GMTTC
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Last November, Rutland was home to a group of players and observers engaged in an unlikely sport for this rural community: table tennis. At the Knights of Columbus/Boys & Girls Club of Rutland gymnasium, the Green Mountain Table Tennis Club (GMTTC) sponsored an open state tournament, it's 46th in its 29-year history, featuring several separate levels of play, from beginner to professional. Participants and non-playing by-standers were treated to a dazzling display of athletic ability, intellectual tactics, and a high degree of controlled enthusiasm; the tournament has traditionally become one of the best -kept athletic events and "secrets" in Rutland's history.

All has not been easy for the sport of table tennis in Vermont, as elsewhere, even though one would not easily guess of those difficulties when observing the goings-on during as successful a tournament as this appeared to be. As explained by Jim Hayford, Jr., one of the premiere players in Vermont (and the son of acclaimed poet James Hayford, Sr.), table tennis reached a pinnacle in Vermont through the competitive play of roughly 50 people associated with General Electric in Burlington from the 1940's through the 1960's. "The game died, in my opinion," states Hayford, "due to the lack of outsiders actually seeing the game." That fact may eventually change, especially since table tennis became an Olympic sport beginning with the 1988 Olympic games.

Another misunderstanding comes from the feeling that most people believe table tennis doesn't necessarily take a great deal of physical ability to play. As soon as one takes a step into a tournament atmosphere, however, that opinion evaporates immediately, if not sooner. Hayford and the other players present address that opinion by the sheer athletic ability sensed in almost every point or play.

"The revolution of table tennis in Vermont," Hayford goes on, "stemmed from the advent of smooth, or soft rubber on the bats (paddles). In the early 1970's people like Doc (Professor Christopher) White of Castleton and Dave Potter of Vergennes became dominant figures in the area through their use of this latest trend. A fellow named Lim Ming Chui arrived on the scene in the mid 1970's and had a club going in Vergennes for a few years. Chui was rated among the top 5 players in

the United States at the time and even guaranteed a purse of \$1,000 to be given at one of his club's state tournaments to anyone who could beat him. Of course, Chui never lost that bet. He remains one of the top amateur players in the United States today (rating 2178); he has since moved away from Vermont to New Jersey."

"Table tennis, for one reason or another," states Jack Devine, founder and long-time (now former) President of the Champlain Valley Table Tennis Club in Shelburne, "simply is not considered a traditional or popular athletic activity in Vermont. It has a national identity with Asian countries and is thought of as a "basement" sport, even though we have some of the top players in the world today." Exposure is necessary, but rarely given. Equipment is usually of poor quality; for example, UVM, the largest college in Vermont numbering approximately 12,000 students, has only one table but refuses to set it up most of the time because school officials claim the students ruin the equipment, and when they do set it up, it's set up on a rug, of all places. "I've seen one table set up in a school" Jim Hayford gestures with a shade of his head, "that actually had bolts coming right up through the surface of the table!" Sandpaper paddles are common in schools that have tables, but are not allowed in any tournament play (unless they have a "retro" event); the opinion among many players is that physical education instructors simply are not aware of the requirements of the sport.

Assuredly, popular fad games like foosball and now computer and video games have led the available younger playing population away from this sport. "If they could become aware of the mental, recreational and athletic aspects of the game," guesses Jack Devine, "I'm sure things would change." Clearly, physical education in the school system should take care to remove this wonderful sport from the basement and include it along with the more traditional, popular "money" sports. The Green Mountain club has placed on its future crosshairs increasing the awareness of the sport through contact with Vermont high schools, providing them with information on the sport, where to purchase quality equipment, instructional materials, and even visits by club members in order to provide demonstration and training. This in turn should lead to more interest in the sport, better players, perhaps even additional clubs. The Green Mountain club has already provided instruction to Cub Scouts with a professionally resourced program which included a manual, weekly training and instruction, and a mini-tournament at its conclusion; the Green Mountain club was the 2nd club in the nation to provide this program to the Scouts. The GMTTC has also

pursued an association with the Boys & Girls Clubs in the state, partnering with the Rutland BGC to offer free instruction and play for all its teen members and staff.

Until recently, there were 3 table tennis clubs in the state of Vermont: Shelburne (located in Vergennes originally, then North Ferrisburgh), Rutland (located in Forest Dale/Brandon for its first 15 years, then Castleton for 1 year, then 4 different locations in Rutland before landing at its present site), and Pittsfield (a failed club, but absorbed by the Green Mountain club). Currently, there are 6 clubs: Barre, Burlington, Norwich, Rutland, Shelburne and Windsor, with the Rutland and Shelburne clubs by far the largest of the lot. The Rutland club has always had a solid membership, at one time numbering 55, but now maintaining a hard-core base of about 25 members. Both the Rutland and Shelburne clubs offer weekly play, club ladders, interclub play between each other, occasional clinics, annual tournaments, and have, among other pieces of top-quality equipment, ball machines that are similar to pitching machines in baseball, on which to train. The Rutland club, the Green Mountain Table Tennis Club, meets every Wednesday evening at the Knights of Columbus/Boys & Girls Club gymnasium at 21 Merchants Row, from 7:00 p.m. to at least 9:30 p.m., a playing facility that is the best at which it has played, offering a full-sized gym with hardwood floors, great lighting, high ceilings, dark-colored walls, bench seating, a locked equipment storage area, a drinking fountain, bathrooms, and lots of parking space, . The fact is, we're indeed quite fortunate to have the availability of this fine sport in our small rural environment, but the support by the community is its thin lifeline. Please feel free to attend as a guest or prospective member or if you'd like to know more about the club and future tournaments, or if you're a youth facility wanting to know more about what we can offer you, please call club President Ronald Lewis at 247-5913 (eves), or visit the club's web site at www.gmttc.com.