

History of the Genesee Valley Table Tennis Club

The roots of table tennis in Rochester go back to the 1930's, as not one but TWO clubs were founded in the year 1938. Kurt Baker, before enlisting in WWII, started a club above the Capitol Theatre while Mike Borrelli was running a club on East Avenue. Ted Mosher and Text Lloyd (then ranked #3 senior in the country) continued to run Baker's club, but unfortunately, both clubs closed due to WWII. Organized play continued in local YMCA's like the Central and Maplewood. In 1956 Kurt Baker (again), with help from Bernie Douthwaite and Ed Murphy, started up the Genesee Valley Table Tennis Club again. This time, it was located on the third floor of the Katz Home Decorating Co. at the corner of Joseph Ave. and Sullivan St. The club (GVTTTC) boasted approximately 60 members, and leagues were played on Monday and Wednesday evenings, and Sunday afternoons.

The game in our earlier era was usually divided into attacking or defensive style players. Paddles were covered with pimped rubber and steady, conservative play marked the competition. Rallies for a single point sometimes lasted several minutes and matches could take over an hour.

Top players of the earlier times were Ben Morgan (who passed away in the 40's), Ted Mosher, Bill Dengler, Rick Kavulciuc, Pete Lyman, Al Wickes and Bob Brickell.

In 1961 the club moved to Ridgecrest Plaza in Greece. The club had 6 tables, cement floors, moderate lighting and a relatively low ceiling. The club was open to members 7 days a week. Leagues were held on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday (Classic League) evenings, and Sunday afternoons. Club officers in this era were Dr. Joe Costanza, Cliff Hagen, Bill Hunt, Bill Butts, Bob Brickell and Walt Stephens, who doubled as the U.S. Eastern Regional Tournament Director. Two tournaments were held each year at the Carter Street Recreation Center.

The Industrial league deserves mention, as it originated back in 1939, and was also organized and run by Ted Mosher. The first winner was the team of Hunt's Hardware. By the mid 1950's though, the league had changed to the Industrial Management Council (IMC) league, and only larger industries were included. The IMC league had difficulty finding a permanent home, and would roam all over the city, playing out of YMCAs, even the YWCA! They also met in a dank room under the Concord bowling alleys, and of course playing at our club sites. The dominating Kodak Park teams won the league every year but twice, when the Kodak Apparatus (Elmgrove Plant) team prevailed. Other teams that belonged to the league were Rochester Telephone, Bausch & Lomb, Rochester Gas & Electric, General Railway Signal, Kodak Office, Pfaudler's, Rochester Products, R. T. French, Stromberg Carlson and Taylor Instrument.

Inverted (sponge) rubber was introduced to the world in the 1950's, and many Rochester players switched from pimped rubber to the smooth sponge. The game changed dramatically. With the new rubber came the opportunity to impart great spins on the ball, thereby changing the complexion of the game entirely. The loop shot (heavy topspin) and close to the table attack play became the most common strategies. The United States Table Tennis Association (USTTA) also initiated a rules change to discourage defensive "stalling" tactics and minimize the time of games. This change was called the expedite rule. Long rallies became rare. Defensive players became a minority, as they couldn't provide consistent or suitable returns to counter the barrage of topspins and hits they faced.

The best players of the time were Helmut Schaller, Mike Ezzo, Don Coluzzi, Dave Hunt, Ted Mosher and Bob Brickell.

The club had an especially strong junior program at the time, and tournaments were fiercely contested. No less than 7 boys shared the junior titles in a 2 year span in the late 1960's. Names like Jeff Anderson, Andy Anvelt, Tom Brickell, Gary Burroughs, Craig Graci, Steve Kazak and Tom Kress (who went on to a career in professional bowling) dotted the scene. Bob Green,

from California, former #3 player in the U.S., lived here for a short while and was most generous in his help for the juniors.

In the mid 1970's the club moved to the Rochester Turner's club on Clinton Ave., which featured a gym floor, high ceiling and good lighting (provided by the GVTTC). When used for tournaments, the club would set up 12 tables, but for league play would use 8 tables.

Rising costs forced us to move again in the early 1980's and we found the Polish Falcon Hall (Nest 52A, on Weyl St., just off Hudson Ave. near Norton St.). The club was open Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings from September through May. The club had 6 new, high quality tables, a gym floor, high ceiling and excellent lighting (provided by the GVTTC). Leagues played on Monday and Wednesday (Classic League) and Friday was reserved for open play. Club membership grew to over 100, and featured a challenge ladder and a practice "robot". Most of the tournaments were played at the Falcon Hall, and Irondequoit High School was the location for our yearly Giant Round Robin tournament.

As the club changed venues, the game shifted also. New technology brought about new rubber surfaces and improved blades, designed to fit the styles of certain players. The caliber of play (perhaps driven by the perception of very aggressive attack) is much higher than the old days, with the use of loop drives (from forehand and backhand) and high toss serves as tricks of the trade. Playing conditions in Rochester took a turn for the better, driven in part by Chuck Knowland, who also brought about the rebirth of the Classic League, featuring almost all of the club's top players. Defensive play also improved again with use of "anti-spin", "feint" and "phantom" rubbers that are not affected by the heavy spins of the players. In fact, the emergence of "anti-spin" rubbers, mixed with inverted rubber "combination" paddles of the same rubber color, forced rule changes geared to produce longer rallies!

Special mention should be made of longtime club member Sager Barton. Sager gave selflessly of his time and money to many of our junior members, also. Most notable of his charges was the talented and modest Joe Billups, who rose to #1 in the club before hitching up with the Marines, where he continued to play in exotic locales like Okinawa, the Philippines and Germany.

The club's driving forces in those years were Bob Brickell, Carolyn Bush, Horace Byfield, Dan Costanza, Don Clawson, Howard Kashtan, Ray Mack and Don Young.

The best players of that era were Jim Shoots, Emile Short, Ray Mack, Joe Billups, Manfred Werner (a German national who worked here for a year in the 1980's) and Craig Bensch.

In 1986, the club moved yet again, this time to the Indian Community Center in Macedon. We stayed there for 10 years before moving to the Rochester Sports Garden in Henrietta, near Monroe Community College in 1996. The club plays on 8 tables on a cement floor with very high ceilings. The club still has a Monday league open to all players, and a Tuesday Classic League. Practice time is available on Saturday mornings. Because the Sports Garden is a year round facility catering to multiple indoor sports, players who want extra playing time can rent the club's tables and play on most any evening.

Year end banquet awards are given for Sportsmanship are given to Monday and Tuesday players in honor of Mark Bunce, who played in the Classic League in the 1980's. Mark passed away as a result of an auto accident while in his 20's, but his contagious smile and excellent attitude live on with the Sportsmanship award.

The top players of the most recent era are Craig Bensch, AJ Carney, DJ Colt, Harry Hawk, Ray Mack, Satrajit (Sam) Mookherhee and Ming Xu.

Over the years, we have had our share of colorful characters in the club. Players who come to mind are Joe Paris, who would hunch over the table and with dogged determination proceed to block the world away. Ken VanDewater's cries of missed "bunnies" are remembered. Charlie Burroughs, when he wasn't hurling fast pitch softball shutouts at Kodak Park, or weight lifting, or skiing down the local slopes, played at the top Rochester level in the Classic League for a few decades. Tony Natale, a world ranked horseshoe player, offered up a unique backhand flick, and Steve Kazak would unnerve you with his stone face. Andy Anvelt chattered to noone in particular (or to whoever might be listening), and could recite match scores dating back 3 decades or so. Lefty and many time champion Jim Shoots practiced endlessly, and the effervescent Bill Spry, with shouts of "Super Loop" deserve mention. Walt Stephens had an array of bats that were equipped with lights and music, and he once made a paddle that weighed 3 and ½ pounds! "Wrong Way" Halladay caused opponents' body contortions, and Doug "the BLOCK" Kleinhammer gives extra effort, mostly from the backhand side. Wayne "Mad Dog" Carney gave

new meaning to giving 110%. And, check out some of the old ping pong paddles that Marty Salata has. He has original paddles that were made in or around 1910 (!) and a full set of paddles from the 1930 era.

Rochester has seen many top ranked players here, beginning with World Champion Richard Bergmann, who gave exhibitions in the late 1930's. In 1955 we hosted the National Championships at Kodak Park, and we have also hosted the Eastern Open in 1940, 1967 and 1986. In local tournaments, we were graced with the presence of former World Team Champion and USTTA president Sol Schiff, Canadian team members Derek Wall and Gideon Joe Ng. Five time U.S. champion Dan Seemiller and his brother Rick, a four time World Team member, gave a clinic here. Two time collegiate champion Jim Dixon (a Rochester favorite from Buffalo) played here many times. A slew of top 20 players have played in our tournaments and Kodak workers were once treated to an exhibition by Dal Joon Lee, former World #13 and 6 time (consecutive!) U.S. champion.

The club's executive committee members and tireless workers behind the scenes are Scott Bellinger, Bob Brickell, Wayne Carney, Alan Estill, John Foxton, Scott Grodevant, Jeff Koch, Ray Mack, Sri Ramaswamy (webmaster) Marty Salata, Walt Soffer and Don Young.

Some things about table tennis have changed and some remain the same. The club still runs leagues and local tournaments yearly. We have always had a mix of players that represent all cultures. They all share the same love for the game.

Members who were or are in the club for the longest tenures are Mike Bacci, Bob Brickell (he has been making paddles for over 50 years!), Tom Brickell, John Foxton, Cliff Hagen, Ray Mack, Ted Mosher, Walt Stephens, John VanDeursen and Don Young.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Rochester has provided more than a few top flight table tennis competitors. Among them:

Tex Lloyd was the #3 ranked Senior in the country.

Ben Morgan was ranked in the U.S. top 20 for several years.

Ted Mosher was ranked in the U.S. top 50 and won County Championships 25 years apart!

Dave Hunt was County Junior and Open Champion, and attained a national Junior ranking of #5.

Andy Anvelt climbed to a Junior ranking of #5, and made the finals of the U.S. Open Junior Doubles.

Don Coluzzi won 13 straight local tournaments in the Open division.

Bob Brickell has won the U.S. Senior Olympics Gold medal for singles several times, and is still ranked in the top 6 in his age group nationally.

Ray Mack was ranked in the U.S. top 50, and was in the County finals in Open singles 15 consecutive years. As an Esquire player (over 50), he made the finals of both the singles and doubles events at the U.S. Nationals. As a hardbat player, he was in the finals of the Over 40 competition at the U.S. Nationals 3 consecutive years, and won the U.S. Nationals Open Hardbat Doubles, and has won Gold Medals in U.S. Senior Olympics events in singles and doubles (with John Foxton).

Don Young is a nationally ranked Senior Esquire player, and won U.S. Senior Olympics Gold Medals in singles and doubles for his age group.

Jim Shoots, aka "the Shooter", won the County tournament Open division 5 years in a row. He and Ray Mack (with only 2 players) played their way into the Open category 3 man National Table Tennis Team championships! Once, during a match with Lim Ming Chui, one of the top players in the country, he roared back from a 2 games to 0, 20-10 deficit to win the best 3 out of 5 match!!

AJ Carney has been ranked in the top 12 nationally as a junior player in the U-14, U-16 and U-18 categories.

John Foxton won a U.S. Senior Olympics Gold Medal in doubles (with Ray Mack) and Silver Medal in singles.

The club has bestowed lifetime achievement awards to Walt Stephens (posthumously), Bob Brickell and Ray Mack.