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National table tennis group in Downtown schools

Four brand new Olympic-caliber table tennis tables are lined up in a row along the room. Straight-as-an-arrow nets divide the folding tables into two playing areas, while players battle back and forth striking a ball with their paddles, seeking an opportunity to score a point on their opponents. Judges count points on the sidelines, while coaches carefully guide their players. The players are focused, determined and well trained. No, this is not the Olympic trials or an international tournament. It's recess at Manhattan Academy of Technology middle school. For a group of 30 student-athletes, it's time for table tennis practice.

In its first year ever at M.A.T., the sport of table tennis is thriving. Thirty middle schoolers have not only shown dedication to the sport during the school day, they also practice every Saturday morning for three hours. The team, which is sponsored by the American Youth Table Tennis Organization, a not-for-profit organization, is as hard working and hard nosed as any other sports team at the middle school. The national group hopes to have middle school children all over N.Y.C. playing the sport, and M.A.T. is one of the first schools to enjoy the program.

The game, commonly called Ping Pong, is played in almost every country in the world, and ranks second to soccer in the number of countries, 140, that have a national association.

The youth organization's director, Ben Nisbet, has been happy with the turnout at M.A.T.

"We are concentrating our efforts into opening free table tennis programs for school-aged children in Lower Manhattan and we are looking to expand to other locations in the area," he said. "In addition to I.S. 126, we run a high school program at Millennium High School" in the Financial District.

Peeru Prizada coaches the M.A.T. team in the school's cafeteria.

The school's athletic director, John DeMatteo, said, "I'm stunned. I've seen such a high level of enthusiasm for this new sport that I never suspected would be there. In our school, the table tennis team works out three times a week and Coach Peeru has done a great job of motivating our athletes. Table tennis is an Olympic sport, and I see opportunities for many of our children to build self esteem and valuable confidence. Their skills have already developed ten-fold from their introductory practices, and the kids love the sport. After the first day, they went out and bought all of their own paddles."

The Saturday program is free to all students. Nisbet said, "We are creating a friendly social environment and an opportunity for students to belong to a sport and a team. The things that we teach — finesse, speed, concentration, teamwork, fair play — are important skills that can be transferred into the school day and outside of the program. Table tennis is a lifetime sport."