

TABLE TENNIS MAKES A COMEBACK

LAST WEEKEND'S NEW YORK CITY OPEN WAS THE HIGHEST-LEVEL CITY TOURNAMENT IN DECADES

By Adam Bloch

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There were 30 table tennis tables arranged around Francis Levien Gymnasium at Columbia University last weekend for the 2009 New York City Open, and it seemed each had a story to tell at any given moment.

At one table, two of the top players in the city, immigrants from China and Guyana, faced off as a crowd gathered, watching them trade subtle slices and vicious topspin backhands. At another, Wang Chen, the Upper West Side's local Olympian, watched as several of her players methodically demolished strong challengers. At another, an elderly gentleman with knee braces was



Taylor Wang returns the ball to her opponent. Photo by Daniel S. Burnstein

playing a courageous backspin lob defense against a much younger opponent. At another, a middle-aged man was facing an 8-year-old and doing his best to take it easy on the young tyke, while at the next table over two intense youngsters traded strokes with a crispness and speed beyond those of much older players.

“This is very high level. Except for the U.S. Open and the national championships, this is about as good as it gets,” said John McFadden, a member of the American Youth Table Tennis Organization, which helped organize the event. “It’s the first time we’ve had an open tournament of this level in New York City since the 1930s.”

McFadden was sweating slightly after absorbing his third straight loss Saturday morning, all against higher-ranked players.

“No wins, but several moral victories,” he said with an indefatigable smile.

Like many Americans, McFadden first picked up the game playing on a basement table with no training and not much technique. He excelled but gave up the sport after college, only to pick it up again 32 years later when he was 54.

“One day I went to Amsterdam Billiards on the Upper East Side before it closed, and I saw they had three tables there,” he said. “And it hit me: I can get a lesson and learn how to play again. I’ve been doing it ever since and having a great time.”

He’s also been involved with the youth organization, a charity that brings table tennis to inner-city kids. So far, the group deals with about 30 schools and 400 children. It hired North American Table Tennis to arrange a showcase event, and the New York City Open was the result. The tournament featured 35 draws and 305 players, and McFadden seemed to know most of them. He pointed out the top competitors, several up-and-comers, a couple of movers and shakers in the small world of American table tennis and some aging legends of the game.



Shawn Embleton gets ready to serve. Photo by Daniel S. Burnstein

The last category included George Braithwaite, a 74-year-old whose slightly graying temples and remarkable sprightliness belied his age. He's won national championships so many times in so many different draws that he can't remember the number of titles he has anymore. But Braithwaite vividly recalls an overseas trip nearly four decades ago, when he played a small role in a big historical moment.

At the time, he was a member of the U.S. national table tennis team. He picked up the game after coming to New York in 1959 and getting a job at the United Nations.

"To begin, I was into track and field," Braithwaite said. "I discovered that the UN had a very nice table tennis club. I got a racket and started playing when it was too cold to train on outdoor tracks. I got hooked on the game, started sacrificing my lunch hours to play and then continued playing after work in the evenings. I wasn't good at first but I had a good time, so I started practicing harder and harder, making adjustments."

After playing in the world championships in Japan in 1971, the U.S. team received an unexpected invitation to come to China for some exhibition matches, inaugurating an encounter known as "ping pong diplomacy," which helped the decades-long Cold War between the two nations slowly begin to thaw. Braithwaite was one of those who traveled to China, suddenly a player in a grand geopolitical drama.

"When we received the invitation, we were very ecstatic about the whole thing," he said. "I knew this was an opportunity to be in a place where the best players in the world were practicing and competing. It was only after several days did we realize that this had become much more than a table tennis tour."

Several tables away from Braithwaite, Emile Goldstein represented the other end of the age spectrum. A tall, lanky teenager with a shock of blond hair, he had just finished blazing his way through the morning session with four wins. A 17-year-old senior at The Beacon School, he grew up on the Upper West Side across the street from Wang Chen's table tennis club and started playing there regularly four years ago. He swiftly improved, becoming one of the top young players in the country, and he even spent a month during the summer training in China.

"I was playing 12-year-olds who were rated 2400 [a very high ranking]. I was getting my butt kicked, but it was good practice," he said of the experience.

Next year, Goldstein expects to head to Ithaca College and play on the table tennis team at nearby Cornell University.

But it's a good bet that he, McFadden, Braithwaite and all the rest will be back in 2010 to help turn the New York City Open into an annual event.