

My Years Growing up at the South Bend Table Tennis Club

Thank you for asking about my recollections and reflections on The South Bend Table Tennis Club. I was delighted as you so kindly brought me up to date about the most recent years of the club, its various locations, the revival and renewal of championship level TT in South Bend.

The simple sounds of names that were so very important to me more than fifty years ago reminded me that John Varga's boys and girls and juniors and junior misses have become seniors and veterans. So, it goes!! The record of national championships amassed by this band of players that were vigorously nurtured by John Varga is indeed remarkable for the small city like South Bend. Though I stopped playing TT more than forty years ago (except for matches with our children and grandchildren) and left South Bend thirty years ago, SB will always be the town my grandparents immigrated to and the town my parents lived and died in and the place from which I surely received the gift of roots in the neighborhood community my parents were deeply attached to. This rootedness is important to me, but even more significant is the support my parents provided for my explorations into the wider world of that small town as well as the even wider range of experiences in many Midwestern and eastern cities that playing TT opened to me. These explorations began as I ventured alone "downtown on the bus" at age 11 to the YMCA where I discovered TT. Even though I had played in my neighborhood and thought I was quite good, my father knew and told me about another level of Table Tennis. My parents encouraged me and they enabled me to grow the wings needed to challenge my neighborhood roots. Thus, the experiences of the YMCA, South Bend Table Tennis Club and travel to tournaments were woven into the texture of places and people that would become formative of my world view and shape the directions of my life. What participation in TT culture provided was a unique fund of lessons learned and access to sport metaphors, jargon and similes that could never become well known and cliché (how many people know to talk about table tennis). Being at the SBTTC provided important and direct ways of learning and then understanding an array of persons that were utterly different from my neighborhood. Their proximity, their varieties of ages, ethnicities, religions, characteristics, idiosyncrasies, levels of education and professionalization, occupations and unemployment were a rush of pluralism that became even more diverse as I began to play in tournaments outside of South Bend. All of this variety in the contexts of a common action+ playing table tennis and being part of an association was sustained by devotion/addiction to TT+ this marginal, ignored and neglected dimension of athletics/sports in America, which was miscast as not very athletic and renamed by the commercial culture and a name most dreaded --- ping pong. Moreover, the club enabled me to experiential learn the difference between neighborhood compact cultures and the civil society framed by a citywide institution such as the YMCA and the world service mission of the Y. The Y was also an institution of a variety of associations and activities staffed for the most part by volunteers. Such experiences of voluntary service, self-help and participation became yet other experiences of diversity in community or communities of diversity. I was entirely inoculated and playfully and happily prepared for some serious work on various types of pathological victimization, isolation and the limits of individualism, as well as learning the personal impacts of political nightmares of the 20th century from first-hand accounts of refugees and the stories of the rise of dictatorship that peppered the TT world. But in this context, I also, learned the therapies of hope and determination and to overcome suffering through the celebration of pluralism, diversity and tolerance and competition and most importantly the humbling recognition, especially for a sport that is largely individualistic with all due respect to my partners in three national championships, Charlene Krizman, Forest Milbourn and Paul Kochanowski + that even to become great in doubles requires more than a good partner. We all really needed and had a healthy club. To become a national-class player requires a great club and for some twenty years we indeed had a great club. Our club had its Tuesday- night round- robins, a monthly handicap round-robin with a point spreads of 19 points from A++ to D- -, leagues and teams, local tournaments, practice sessions, a challenge board and a Varga rule that was mandated for some of us. This rule required that we play weaker players before playing someone of equal strength or better. Our club had its clear benchmarks of quality and competency + the qualitative measures were certain you were one-star until you could beat Bill Hoyt, you could not become a three star until you could beat Arnold Smith and you were a

four star until you beat Jack Foster or when John Varga said so--- after winning a national championship or beating JVB. The latter victory was always at your own peril or perversely your interest in hearing rare Hungarian words and hissing, that stunning invoked powers without words, which could erupt on the rare occasion of a junior beating the coach. Other example of what made TT in SB great was spending Saturday morning with the youngest "walk-ins" to the Y + our club's talent pool + and providing each of these 7-10-year old's with at least five minutes of instruction at each table. They learned how to hold a paddle, address the table and shift the positions to hit a forehand and backhand and of course, to serve, legally. Our club sponsored the US Open and our parents and all club members volunteered their time and talent even more unstintingly than their ongoing support for the us and the sport. We were so engaged in TT and with the many members and in this context under disciplined and demanding eagle eyes of JVB the club was a community of characters, some were deeply involved others in and out of the game and club. Many of us and I am sure learned much about ourselves and others as we played and practiced. I certainly did during my decade of serious attention and participation in TT culture of the SBTTC. At bottom I learned what the achievement of excellence in any field would take, your personal abilities, attentiveness and determination and the help of an entire community interested in cooperation and competition related to excellence in this activity. The SBTTC naturally cultivated friendships in the context of an organization committed to athletic activity. Some portion of my being resonates when memories and reflections of those times and persons unexpected visit to remind me TT is quite a game and that our club was quite a launching pad. I am grateful for being part of its membership and for the awesome variety TT culture open my life to. I am grateful for the new vistas presented by vibrant clubs in various cities of the mid-west and east that I came to know. The virtues of competition and cooperation and the power of voluntary associations in American were present in microcosm in the support we had and the pleasure of playing and winning that depended on your preparation and the good will of the members that helped you to become more able you believed you could be. It's time to praise the club members that made us champions. Thank you all for being exactly the way you were.

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