

Fond Memories of the South Bend Table Tennis Club 1956-1962: Paul Kochanowski

I became aware of the South Bend Table Tennis Club in either 1955 or 1956 when John Kromkowski and John Varga played an exhibition for the St. Joseph High School students. I was mesmerized by seeing table tennis played at this level. John Varga played offense and John Kromkowski retrieved from distances far away from the table. Both players had beautiful form, and they seemed to be able to make shots that I had never imagined possible. Shortly after this, I stopped by the club on Main Street in the old YMCA building where again Varga and Kromkowski were practicing. I decided at that point that I wanted to join the club and learn how to play. Everyone in the club was very welcoming, and after a short while, I convinced my younger brother Mark to also join. (Unfortunately, Mark has died recently so thinking back on my years at the club brings back many memories of him as young boy.) I was more obsessional (as I still am with almost anything I tackle) than Mark, but the two of us spent many hours over about a five-year period learning how to become moderately good players and winning a few tournaments, some with the help of others like John Kromkowski. I have always been a shy and withdrawn person, totally opposite of John Varga who was very outgoing and very direct. Nonetheless, I became very close to John. I will always remember him as a caring, selfless, dedicated, skillful coach, who, in spite of his strictness, taught me a great many things, not only about table tennis but life in general. For one, John reinforced my desire to excel. He had a very low tolerance for sloppy, half-hearted dedication to the game (or to anything else). He wanted each of us in the club to be the very best possible. He also drummed into me the importance of physical and mental discipline both during practice and in tournaments. I particularly remember how he would not tolerate outburst after poor play because such emotional tantrums were debilitating to an athlete's performance. Although some of his coaching techniques might today seem a little overboard, they, nonetheless, were very effective. For example, placing thumbtacks inside the heels of a player's shoes did more to keep the player on his/her toes than saying a thousand times "don't play flatfooted" (as my brother Mark found out the hard way; but became a much more fleet footed player thereafter). Besides the towering presence of John Varga, I still have many memories of the club itself. The first thing that impressed me when I joined, and perhaps at first overwhelmed me, were the many rules posted under plastic on the back wall of the club, about play etiquette, player rankings, challenges, etc all of which had been well thought out by John Varga and prior club members. I remember Mark and me starting out as lowly one-star players (four-star players were the elite level players) with our tags at the bottom of the triangular challenge board. As I recall, a player could only challenge two spots above his or her place on the board. Immediately, I set my goals to move up as far as I could, and after sometime I did move up the board, never near the top, however. I also remember the Tuesday night round robins (double elimination, as I recall) where most, if not all, of the club's players participated each week. These events provided weaker players like Mark and me the opportunity to test our progress against some of the club's top players. Perhaps most of all, I remember many of the people that played during those years. Frank and John Kromkowski, Jack Foster, Forrest Milbourn, Bob Christ, Bill Maxwell, Bill Flanigan, Dave and Charlene Krizman, Stan Gebo, John Stancatti, and Gordon Barclay (unfortunately, I am probably leaving out some others who played during this time period, and for that I apologize). I always felt a very strong sense of camaraderie and support among the members at the South Bend Table Tennis Club. Even though Mark and I were the weakest players when we started out, much better players were always willing to practice with us and, in general, were very supportive and helpful in our quest to become better.

The most vivid other memories that come back to me are the road trips club members took to various regional tournaments (Chicago, Indianapolis, Kalamazoo, Cleveland, Grand Rapids, etc.) We usually started out on Friday after school with John Varga driving. Most of us were terrified when riding with John. He had the unfortunate habit of making eye contact with whomever he was speaking no matter how fast he was driving or how congested the circumstances. Again, and again, the car would be swerving off the road onto the apron with the front seat passenger trying to grab the steering wheel to get it back on the road. This, of course, would make John quite angry, and he would then deliberately drive the car onto the apron and then take his hands off the steering wheel, informing all of us cowards that the laws of physics would keep us moving straight ahead. At other times, when going 60 or 70 miles an hour, John would again let go of the steering wheel and take his sweater off over his head. Still other times, usually on the way back from a tournament after he had played bridge all night, he would be dosing off at the wheel. Prior to these trips we would argue amongst ourselves about where we would sit in the car, hoping to increase our chances of survival if a crash should occur (fortunately, none ever did happen). The tournaments themselves were always lots of fun. We played and had contact with some very outstanding players (I don't remember many of these, but Norman Vandewalle still stands out) from other cities, and it was exciting for Mark and me, who during some of this time were high school students, to stay in hotels, go out to eat late at night, interact with older adults, and be part of the tournament environment.

All and all, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be a member of the club. Over the years I have had many other positive experiences (a wonderful wife, children, grandchildren, a rewarding career, a wonderful violin teacher and the like), but what I gained from my association with John Varga and all of the other club members always have meant a great deal to me and to my brother Mark. (I remember shortly after Mark died talking to wife Susan about all the positive memories he had conveyed to her about John Varga and the club.) I will always feel a deep sense of gratitude to John and all of the other club members for all that I received from them. I hope similar clubs will always exist to offer other young people the same experiences and opportunities my brother and I received more than four decades ago.