

Table tennis players share love for sport Influx of foreigners gives club a boost

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Body

Alla Ginzburg slams the ball at James Williams, who scoots backward in his wheelchair to return it over the net.

As the ball accelerates into a blur, the young Russian Jewish immigrant and the paralyzed American black man become united in the intensity of their concentration. Like several dozen others from profoundly different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, they have come to the steamy Chastain Park gym for the communion of **table tennis**.

On **tables** lined up on both sides of a partition down the middle of the gym's floor, the members of the Atlanta **Table Tennis** Association faced each other - Russians, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, British, Latinos and Americans.

"You'll find an Iraqi playing a Jew and having the best time," said Terry Madigan, an American member of the **club**, which plays Tuesday nights and Sunday mornings.

The **influx** of foreign immigrants into Atlanta is providing a **boost** for the 30-year-old, 110-member organization. Last year, the group gained 42 new members, most foreign-born. The Central Atlanta **Table Tennis Club**, which plays at the Coan Park Gym in southeast Atlanta, has 140 members, including **players** from Nigeria and other African countries, Lebanon and Mexico.

The immigrants generally play at a much higher level than the Americans, reflecting a reality that is painful to **table tennis** enthusiasts - the game is not taken seriously in this country. "**Table tennis** education is not available here in the U.S.," said Rich Peluso, president of the Chastain Park group.

Peluso said that although many Americans are familiar with the purely recreational game of Ping Pong, the United States lacks the in- depth training programs to develop serious **players** of international caliber. "We will be lucky to have one American on the U.S. Olympics team," he said.

In Asia, Europe and Latin America, the game is as developed as baseball is here, with countless youth teams, training programs and adult **clubs**.

Eugene Parnas, a refugee from Minsk, Belarus, who has been in Atlanta six months, said "It's very popular in Russia. It's not popular in the U.S. at all." Parnas, like other **club** members, said he had a tough time finding it because of the lack of attention the **sport** receives.

Don Miller, an Englishman and an administrator for Holiday Inn Worldwide, remembers asking for time off to play in a tournament. "If you want to play, come to my basement," Miller's boss told him. "Why do you need days off?"

Those attitudes are changing in some places, however. In Augusta, the Augusta College team won four collegiate titles. Jimmy Butler, the best American **player** in the world, also lives in Augusta.

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"We are trying to create Olympics players here," said Pete May, a volunteer for the college who recruited many of its players. The team, though, must depend on foreign players - its 10 members include two Pakistanis, one Peruvian, one Chinese and one Indian.

The immigrants are the best players with the Atlanta Table Tennis Association. The group's top player is Dan Lim of Malaysia, who now is playing with his country's national team. Next is Mark Dubin, 24, who immigrated here from St. Petersburg, Russia.

Ginzburg, 21, who said she left "a dangerous situation in Russia" to immigrate here, has played in several tournaments here and is ranked 1,700th in the country. She's an assistant teacher at Garden Hills Elementary.

Williams, an Atlanta native who won a silver medal at the Paralympics in Barcelona last year, is one of the few Americans in the club who can compete equally with the immigrants.

The No. 3 paraplegic player in the world, Williams, who also competes in tournaments against able-bodied players, said he welcomes the immigrants. "The more competition you have, the better you become," he said. "I think it's great seeing different styles."

Graphic

Photo: Atlanta's James Williams won a silver medal at the Paralympics in Barcelona last year. /JONATHAN NEWTON / Staff

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