SPORTS & FITNESS

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Practicing table tennis recently at MIT, Eugene Shuster, above, prepares to slice through his serve; Yin Wang, left, is about to return a serve, while other players and their partners work on strategy.

They put their love of tennis on the table

By Bob DiCesare
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CAMBRIDGE – Albert Lau, 59, and Yin Wang, 12, battled fiercely one recent Friday night, but it wasn't a case of an older man picking on a kid. It was Wang who issued a challenge to Lau.

The two were playing table tennis. After a long series of serves, volleys, forehands, and backhands, Wang captured the spirit of the evening by making a particularly remarkable return of serve to win the point, then threw his arms in the air and screamed "Yeeeaaahhh!"

In two weeks, Wang, of Brookline, and Lau, of Everett, will be rooting for each other in different divisions as they join an estimated 90-100 competitors in the Beantown Pro Duck Tour table tennis tournament at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The tournament is sanctioned by USA Table Tennis and prizes include cash awards and trophies.

According to figures from the national organization, table tennis is the second most popular participation sport in the world behind soccer. It's an Olympic sport, but the World Championship of Table Tennis, which takes place every two years, receives more entries from more countries than the Olympics.

China and Sweden produce most of the top players in the world; more than 1 million people play table tennis in China, the current world team champion. The term "ping-pong" is Chinese for table tennis. Sweden's Jan-Ove Waldner is the world individual champion.

In the United States, organized table tennis is a little harder to find.

"We're hidden," said David Marcus, 41, of Somerville, a highly ranked player and certified national tournament umpire. "It's definitely a closet sport compared to the mainstream sports like football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer. But there are over 400 USATT members in Massachusetts and over 7,000 nationwide.

"It's a good sport to participate in because it is geared to all levels," added Marcus.

Lau, who retired to the United States from Hong Kong four years ago, is one of the better senior players in the country and plays in many local senior tournaments. In 1996, he won the US Open over-50 title in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and is a former two-time over-50 senior champion in Hong Kong.

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ALBERT LAU
Table tennis player

"It's a good sport that is different from most others," said Lau. "Older people can play table tennis because you don't have to play so hard. It's milder and not as strong as regular tennis because it's more compact. But you need good vision and quick reflexes to keep up with the ball."

Service is very important in table tennis, and often makes the difference between winning and losing among highly competitive players. The most common serve among recreational players is an underspin serve, executed with a slicing, downward motion. There's also a sidespin serve, where a player tries to cut the ball for more sideways spinning action, and the high-toss serve, in which the better players toss the ball high in the air and then strike it on the way down before it hits the table.

A wooden racket, or paddle, goes for as low as $15 in sporting goods stores, but top-of-the-line rackets for competitive players run $28 for one with a layer of sponge in the middle and an additional $50 for two thin films of smooth rubber coverings. Light, plastic table tennis balls, roughly the size of golf balls, are inexpensive.

Helen Huang, 20, played basketball in high school in South Carolina, but discovered table tennis last year when she entered MIT as an undergraduate majoring in material science engineering.

"Table tennis is fun and challenging," said Huang, who lives on campus. "I really enjoy it because I'm learning and getting better at it. I consider it a sport, not a game. I love the speed of the ball, and the spins on the ball make it challenging. Once a match gets going, I'm into it. I don't get tired. I can go hours on end."

Liang Liung, 37, of Dorchester, is coach of the MIT table tennis club program, but his proudest accomplishment came last year when he became national handicap champion at a tournament in Las Vegas. He is quick to note the subtle differences between table tennis and court tennis.

"Mental toughness and concentration are important because points can go longer than court tennis," said Liung. "The average speed of the ball is 40 miles per hour, which is faster than you think because you're close to the table, but easier to return service than court tennis, which makes the points longer."

Marcus is chief organizer for gathering and directing local table tennis players to various recreational sites, such as Strike One in Burlington and many of the college and university recreation halls in the Boston area.

"There's a definite overlap of a lot of basement players who have the opportunity to seek out other people and play fun, competitive matches in the area," said Marcus. "Tournaments are set up for all styles and abilities. And there's always a friendly handshake after the match."

▶ *The Beantown Pro Duck Tour, sanctioned by USA Table Tennis and sponsored by the MIT Table Tennis Club, is scheduled for Sunday, Nov. 22, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., at MIT's Du Pont Gymnasium, 120 Massachusetts Ave. Entry fee is $7 and participants are placed within groups according to ranking and/or ability. The tournament is free for spectators.*

Those looking for a place to play table tennis recreationally, or who would like to learn how to play, can contact David Marcus at 492-4317, at djmarcus@ici.net, or home.ici.net/djmarcus.