



Samuel Hoffman/The Journal Gazette

Vicki Lu, 9, fires a shot against her friend Kelia Li, at the Three Rivers Table Tennis Club at Messiah Lutheran Church

Don't Call it Ping Pong

Table tennis club is growing gradually

By Phil Bloom
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You know the game. You probably played it in a friend's basement or garage.

You know – the one where you line up on opposite sides of a green table and use wooden paddles to swat a tiny plastic ball back and forth.

Just don't call it ping-pong. It's table tennis, and although they may look the same, purists know the difference.



Dannenfels

"Table tennis is a sport," Tom Dannenfels said. "Ping-pong is a recreational activity."

Actually, Ping-Pong is a registered trademark of Parker Brothers. Table tennis is what they play in the Olympics, and it's what they play twice a week at the Three Rivers Table Tennis Club.

"We've been going for 8 1/2 years and growing gradually," said Dannenfels, one of the club's cofounders. "We started with about 8 to 10 people, and now we get 20 to 25 on a given evening when we play."

"Our mission is to promote the sport of table tennis in the Fort Wayne area and encourage people to get out and play the sport for recreation as well as competition."

Open to all ages and skill levels, the club meets 7 to 10 p.m. Tuesdays and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays at Messiah Lutheran Church, 7211 Stellhorn Road. The club holds informal tournaments on the first Tuesday of each month.

There are no membership dues.

"If you come, you're a member," Dannenfels said. "If you don't come, you're not a member."

There is a \$2 charge to play for age 18 and older; \$1 for younger than 18, with the revenue used to buy new balls, new nets and to help the church defray the cost of maintaining the gymnasium.

"It's the cheapest sport – \$2 to play for four hours," Dannenfels said. "You can't beat that."

The cost of a paddle is altogether different.

"A good paddle will start at about \$70 on up to \$200," he said, and the only way to get one is online or through a mail order. "You buy the piece of wood and each piece of rubber as separate items and glue them together yourself."

The most noticeable difference is these paddles have smooth rather than dimpled surfaces in order to impart more



Andy Sanchez, 12, left, squares off against his father, Venny Sanchez

spin to the ball.

"There's a lot more surface area for the ball to make contact with," Dannenfels said. "If you want traction in a dragster, you don't put tread on the tire. You take all the tread off. You want as much rubber on the road as you can get."

With a table tennis paddle, that's critical.

"Strategy involves the speed of the ball, the spin of the ball and placement of the ball," Dannenfels said. "Those three things together determine how your opponent has to react."

"Those are the three key elements, and the way you can fool an opponent is by putting spin that they're not expecting, or having a changeup or knuckle ball with no spin at all. That can mess up the mind of an opponent." Some players will use paddles with one side smooth and the other dimpled in order to vary the shots

The club has nine tables, including one rigged with a device that shoots a steady stream of balls so that one player can work on his or her skills.

"I would say the equipment we have is top of the line," Dannenfels said. "The tables cost \$1,500 apiece. You'll not find better equipment anywhere. If you play here, you've played with the same equipment played with at national tournaments, so you're ready for anything you might encounter."

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Tom Dannenfels, cofounder,
Three Rivers Table Tennis Club

The club encourages members to play against higher skilled players.

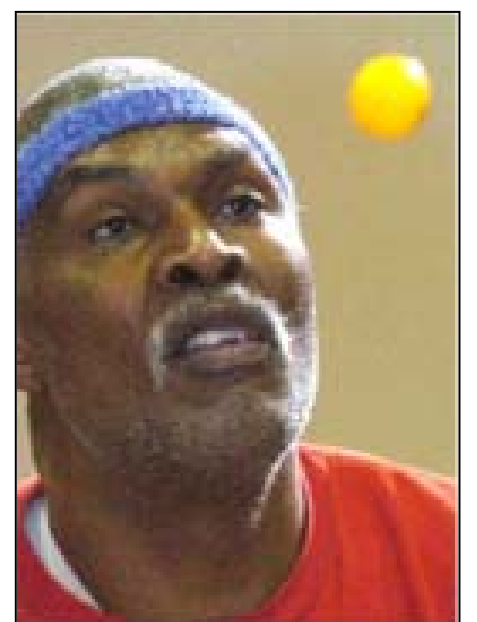
"We want them to have the experience of playing the top players, something to aspire to," Dannenfels said. "You can see what shot you're having trouble with if you play with better players."

"Although it's not always the most fun for us to do that, because we're here to promote the sport we're more than willing to make that, I call it a sacrifice, effort to play people of all rankings."

Bob Hall of Columbia City appreciates that aspect of the club. A retired surgeon, he took up table tennis, and the Three Rivers club provided the opportunity.

"Before then, I'd only played in the basement," he said. "I had to learn all the new strokes, all new serves."

"I'm still learning. It's challenging. You don't come to play for fun. You



Ricardo Reid concentrates on his serve technique. Some players use paddles with one dimpled surfaces and one plain surface.

come to improve. Everybody is here to learn, to improve. You also have fun, but unless you're interested in improving your game, somehow you just don't fit in. Everybody is better than I am, so I'm always playing with somebody better. Each one plays a little different, so I learn different things from different people. I'm 74 years old, and I want to keep on playing as long as I can."

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