

MY WORD



The Sweet Pong of Victory

DAVID COHEN EXPOSES THE SHADOWY, EVEN DANGEROUS, WORLD OF THAT MALIGNED AND MISUNDERSTOOD SPORT: TABLE TENNIS.

AS WIMBLEDON IS ramping up, and millions of Australians are in the grip of tennis mania, let us pause a moment to consider tennis's poor cousin: table tennis. It is a sport so irredeemably uncool that tennis would be embarrassed to be seen with it in public.

Having once played competitive table tennis – insofar as I was, as a teenager in Perth, part of a C-division pennant team – I am very well aware of the game's lowly status. Things might be different in countries like China or Hungary, but here in sunny Australia, indoor sports in general are considered, well, a bit lame.

I remember pennant table tennis as a slightly shameful activity conducted in fluorescent-lit suburban community centres, in the company of like-minded nerds. My team would have looked equally at home at a sci-fi convention. There was Sanjay, a short Indian guy; Trung, a short Vietnamese guy; me, a short Jewish guy; and Steve, a tall but absurdly thin English guy. We wore tracksuits, but our resemblance to athletes ended there.

What really bothered me wasn't the lack of glamour so much as the absence of danger. The worst injury you might have sustained was if the bat accidentally flew out of your opponent's hand and cracked open your skull, but what kind of a war story would that make? "Cool scar. How'd you get it?" "Playing table ten...er, I mean...abseiling."

Halfway through the winter pennant season, I seriously considered abandoning table tennis for something

edgier, something more extreme, something that would bring me face to face with eternity. Squash, perhaps.

But then we came up against the team from Karnet Prison Farm.

Okay, so Karnet was a minimum-security facility, but as far as I was concerned these guys were hardened criminals. Hardened criminals who just happened to like table tennis. They didn't look that much different from any other team, except that they were accompanied by an armed guard, and one of them – Big Ron, they called him – had a face decorated with homemade tattoos.

Thus far Karnet had remained undefeated; our team, Stirling Table Tennis Club, was in third position. Like a lot of matches, this one took place at the WA Table Tennis Centre, a neutral venue in the CBD. It seems odd, looking back, that prisoners – even minimum-security ones – should have been allowed to compete in ping-pong competitions in the outside world. Was this part of some experimental sport-release program? Back then, it never even occurred to me to wonder.

As it happened, I drew Big Ron in the opening match. At first, I was reluctant to beat him for fear of being stabbed. He had the cold eyes and tattooed face of a serial murderer, and the guard sat too far away for my liking. What could he do, really, if Big Ron suddenly pulled out a shiv? I practically handed him the first game on a plate.

And yet my own killer instinct somehow kicked in for the second game, and I beat him 21-16. I was pleasantly

surprised when he didn't stab me, and by the third and final game I'd adopted an almost devil-may-care attitude, trouncing Big Ron 21-12. He shook my hand and said, "Well played, son." Was that prison code for: "Watch your back"? Was it the handshake of death?

I like to think that my victory emboldened the rest of the team, because we wound up defeating Karnet Prison Farm, ending their winning streak. Even when we came up against them again in the semi-finals, beating them a second time, Big Ron and his gang were gracious losers.

Or were they? Revenge is, after all, a dish best served cold. I pictured Big Ron marking off the days on the wall of his cell, waiting patiently. Even after all these years, I can never completely relax.

The point is that, contrary to what most people think, competition table tennis is not a walk in the park – unless it's a scary, threatening park populated by hardened (or, at least, semi-hardened) criminals.

Which brings us, full circle, back to tennis. Yes, it may have the glamour, the money, the sex-symbol athletes in peak physical condition, but where's the danger? Where's the simmering violence? How many genuine outlaws have you seen on the pro tennis circuit? All right, so Boris Becker got done for tax evasion, but he's not exactly Al Capone.

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