

The Little White Ball

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Table tennis is all the rage in the national media right now, what with the ping-pong action involving Barack Obama and David Cameron in recent days. Picture editors have had a field day with the stills and many have looked for other shots of statesmen and women playing the game described by Howard Jacobson as the “most democratic of sports”.

Jacobson was referring to the mass appeal of table tennis, but also to the fact that you do not need a great deal of money or prestige to play the game. A dining table and a couple of plates will do, along with the inevitable row of books to masquerade as a net.

The power of ping pong over the collective imagination has been explored many times, not least in Jacobson’s *Mighty Walzer*, but also in essays and other artistic endeavours. One particular favourite is *Sizzling Chops and Devilish Spins*, an enigmatic memoir about table tennis, sex and staying alive by the underrated player and academic Jerome Charyn.



Ping! London in Soho

Henry Miller was an aficionado as is Charles Saatchi. Indeed, if you venture into the City, onto trading floors and the ante rooms at hedge funds, or into the cosmopolitanism of Soho, with its media and creative types, you will find a common passion for ping pong. That is one reason why the Ping! London events caught the imagination: they appealed to the paradoxical idea of the sport as both universal and fringe.

Another admirer of table tennis, to get back to where we started, was Mao, perhaps the most influential statesman of his generation. The former Chairman may be regarded by history as one of the most murderous of national leaders, but he was also the man who got the little white ball moving in Red China, a movement that has culminated most recently with the domination at the World Championships in Rotterdam.

Mao used the shake-hands grip, somewhat ironically given that the majority of great China players who flourished during his political leadership went for the penholder style. It is striking that whenever you go to the big metropolises of China, you still see recreational players in the parks and the pavements playing with the old penhold technique. And it is also striking that they are remarkably good.

This takes us back to return to the idea of table tennis as inherently democratic. Perhaps that is why Mao decreed it should be the sport of the masses: it is easily learned, easily played, good for the body and mind, and enjoyable for all ages. Miller once said “the focal point in my house is the ping pong room. I take on players from all over the world. I play a steady defensive Zen like game.”

Perhaps all table tennis is, at some level, Zen like?

Of course, Jacobson would argue that the Zen disappeared from ping pong with the advent of sponge and, later, glue. He has always maintained that authentic table tennis, real table tennis, was the sport played in the 1950s, players knocking the ball back and forward in eternal dialogue, the hard bats not permitting not much spin, but facilitating instead a more coherent narrative structure.



Marty Reisman

I have long been ambivalent on the issue. Playing a game of hard bat in a New York basement with the high priest of 1950s ping pong Marty Reisman has given me an appetite for the old game and a recognition that Leach, Barna and Bergmann were some of the greatest heroes in the history of the sport, pioneers who took table tennis into the collective imagination of post war Europe in a way that has never been replicated.

But then I also must acknowledge that for all the charm of the hard bat game, it has never given us such a luminous genius, such an aesthetic maelstrom, as Jan Ove Waldner. Whatever happens between now and the end of time, I doubt we shall ever revise the opinion that in his hands, and, yes, with glue and sponge, table tennis was taken to its highest and most exalted place. He was the Mozart and the Picasso of the sport rolled into one.

Cameron and Obama will never play like Waldner, of course, but it was nice to see them have a hit and, in a small way, become inducted into our tribe. It is a tribe that exists all over the world, and in the most unlikely of places. And it is a tribe that will continue to prosper, possibly even grow. After all, it is the most democratic of sports.

By Matthew Syed

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