

Celebrity Serves

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By Jeremy Wilson

When Boris Johnson famously declared that “whiff-whaff is coming home” at the end of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, table tennis was propelled into the national consciousness, and, although it is a sport that is sometimes perceived to be a minority pastime in England, it can already boast some considerable celebrity interest among its 300 million participants around the world.

Visit the training ground of just about any Premier League football club and you will find a table tennis table and some seriously competitive players. Rio Ferdinand, the former Manchester United and England player, reckons he is the best table tennis playing footballer, although Craig Bellamy and Robin van Persie might join that particular argument. On Arsenal’s pre-season tour of Asia, Theo Walcott was even asked why he had chosen football rather than table tennis. He replied by telling his Chinese questioner how much he liked table tennis. He then suggested they play a game.

Yet the celebrity interest in table tennis is not just confined to sportsmen and women. The British Prime Minister and American president, David Cameron and Barack Obama, showed off their skills at a school during this year’s state visit. Cameron claimed that he had learnt the game from former chancellor Norman Lamont. Oscar-winning Hollywood actress Susan Sarandon is a massive fan of the sport and helped launch a table tennis café in New York. Visitors to the club – named SPiN – have included George Clooney, Scarlett Johansson and Jamie Foxx.

Sarandon, a star of *Thelma and Louise*, discovered table tennis through her son, Miles, and then decided to help launch SPiN after meeting three friends who had successfully been hosting table tennis parties in their loft. Salman Rushdie, 50 Cent and the Beastie Boys were apparently among those who took part.

Rushdie, who has played regularly since the age of 13, even took part in a recent table tennis feature on BBC’s *The One* show. “There’s a huge ping pong sub-culture,” said Sarandon. “George Clooney is a huge ping pong fan, Ed Norton trained in China. Nobody wants to say because it is supposed to be such a geeky thing, but its like a tattoo. Once you say that you have a tattoo, everyone starts undressing. If you say that you play ping pong, all these closet ping pong players come out. Ping pong transcends gender and age. Thirteen year old girls can beat 35 year old men. I find it’s better for sharpness of mind than crossword puzzles. It’s fast, fun, inexpensive and almost impossible to get hurt.”

On this side of the Atlantic, Blur frontman Damon Albarn is a massive fan of the game. When he was the guest editor on Radio Four’s *Today* programme, he included a section on table tennis. “Yeah, everywhere I go I have to have a table tennis table. I love it; it’s a brilliant way to relax when you’re working,” he said.

At the Lyon festival in 2008, he even requested the use of a table tennis table as part of his negotiations for performing. “If you give us a table tennis table then you’ll get a longer set,” he told the organisers. Albarn was also a keen viewer of the Olympic tournament at the last Olympics and has had the chance to train with some of Britain’s junior team.

A match against Kano, a British rap star, has been a huge hit on YouTube. Albarn demonstrates a solid back-hand push but a rather less reliable forehand as he eventually succumbs. However, Kano, who features on Gorillaz’s single *White Flag*, recently revealed that they are currently level in their personal duel. “Me and Damon have this huge competition going on in table tennis,” he said. “He beat me last but we’re currently on three-all.” The Olympics will clearly provide a huge opportunity for so many sports across Britain next year but, when it comes to celebrity spotting, there will be worse places to hang-out than the ExCeL centre, the docklands base for “Whiff-Whaff” next summer.

Van Persie

Damon Albarn

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