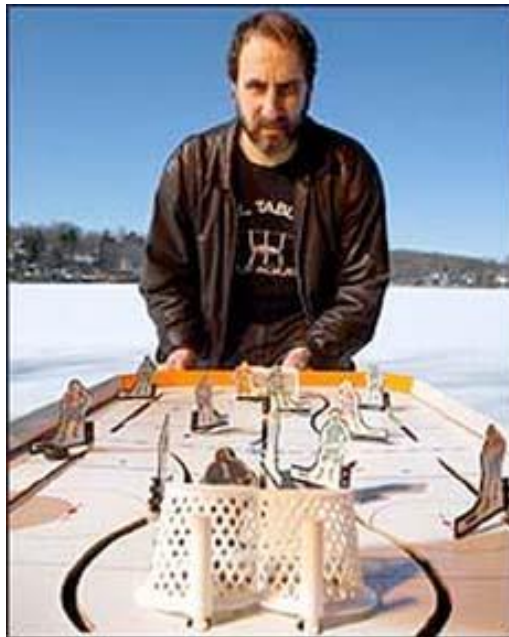


'Chess at 700 miles an hour'

A philosopher's obsession with the game of table hockey.
And he wants to bring it to the world, says Randy Starkman
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Author: Starkman, Randy
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David Bergman for the Toronto Star. Lou Marinoff practises the game he loves, table hockey, on Walton Lake outside of his home in Monroe, N.Y. "It's simple enough for children to play, but complex enough to fascinate adults," says Marinoff, a professor of philosophy at City College of New York.

His book *Plato Not Prozac!* is an international bestseller published in 24 languages. He's founding president of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. And he's a faculty member of the World Economic Forum.

But talk to Lou Marinoff and it quickly becomes clear this philosophy professor from Montreal would ultimately like to become known as the man who brings table hockey to the world.

Marinoff is fanatical about the game. His fervour is on display in the documentary *Table Hockey The Movie* which recently aired on CTV. He calls table hockey "chess at 700 miles per hour."

"It's a really beautiful and sophisticated game," said Marinoff. "When you watch it played at the highest level, there's so much dexterity and skill involved. It appeals to people who have any talent in their hands. Musicians love this game. It's like an instrument."

Marinoff, an associate professor of philosophy at The City College of New York, isn't deterred by the notion that philosophy professors would not be pegged as natural table hockey aficionados.

"Philosophers are allowed to play games, too," notes Marinoff.

"The way Japanese warriors trained, life itself was a game. Table hockey is a great game at a philosophical level. It's simple enough for children to play, but complex enough to fascinate adults.

"If you look across the spectrum of sport, which game succeeds best on a miniature level when it's brought to the table top, which captures the sport's essence and integrity? Ping-pong looks nothing like tennis. Foosball's nothing like soccer. Football had a couple of versions, but none worked.

"Table hockey goes way beyond all these games and really does capture the game's essence, the passing and shooting, the checking, the great saves, the fast-break pass. That's why people really love it so much. It's just like hockey."

But as Marinoff well knows, table hockey's popularity has been on the downswing for a long time, since replaced by video games and other more trendy distractions.

Still, he's convinced it could have a renaissance and he could be a big part of that. To that end, Marinoff has been working with designer David Fink of Vancouver to develop a new prototype for table hockey to bring it to a new level. Many innovations are in the works, including a new mechanism to drive the players and a new surface that better simulates real ice.

"The days of buffing with Pledge should be over," said Marinoff, a statement that will have resonance to veteran table hockey players who use the commercial cleaner as a Zamboni for their games.

At several junctures in *Table Hockey The Movie* made by Halifax-based Triad Films, Marinoff is seen unsuccessfully trying to get toy manufacturers to buy into his vision. But the recent release of the movie, he says, has led to two more meetings with major toy companies. He wants a manufacturer who will take table hockey seriously.

"As I said in the documentary, the game has been treated too much like a toy and not enough like a sport," he said.

His dream is to bring the game to places where there is little to no background in hockey, including Africa, Latin America and Asia.

"Children need constructive competition in life," said Marinoff. "Table hockey is a really good game for that. You can play one-on-one or doubles, girls and boys alike. There are a lot of destructive aspects to our TV and video culture, which neglect development of the whole person. With table hockey, you develop motor skills, good hand-to-eye coordination and tremendous focus and attentiveness and the virtue of sportsmanship.

"It's also really a great equalizer. My ex-wife was a great player. She had to be. She was my sparring partner. She even beat the U.S. champ in a friendly match. You don't have to be big or muscular to be good at table hockey."

Asked which ancient philosophers might have made big-time table hockey players, Marinoff has a couple to put forward Pythagoras as a player, and Sun Tzu as a coach.

"Pythagoras explored the connections between philosophy, mathematics and music," said Marinoff. "And most great table hockey players embody (1) a sound philosophy of the game (2) mathematical precision in their systems and (3) the hand-eye coordination, practice habits, and performance skills prized by musicians.

"Sun Tzu, who wrote The Art of War, showed wisdom, clarity and humanity in sizing up his adversaries and coming up with winning strategies. What is true of war is also true of sport (the moral equivalent of war). I'd want Sun Tzu as a coach in my corner."

Marinoff has even managed to get some interest in his project from colleagues at the World Economic Forum, an independent body which serves as a framework for the world's leaders to address global issues.

"They're always on the lookout for cultural things and things of a social value, especially post 9-11. If you think about it, it could be a good game or event in the Mideast where Arabs and Israelis could be playing each other. It's a way of defusing political and military tensions. The Greeks were the ones who used games and sport as confrontation of a constructive and non-lethal nature to replace warfare."

Marinoff professes little concern about skeptics.

"I think there were people who said the Wright Brothers would never get off the ground. If you're passionate, you do it, regardless of what people say."

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