

# The Fastest Game Off Ice

Fiddling and twiddling with the greatest.  
Table hockey at the international level is no piddling little game

By Chris Zelkovich

THIS IS the Hall of Cities Ballroom of the Marriott Inn in Chicago. It has seen many a businessmen's convention in its time, many an elegant dinner, but never anything like this.

There are no well-dressed sales executives here today, no ice cubes clinking in cocktail glasses, no stuffy speeches. The order of the day is blue jeans and hockey sweaters; the drinks are swigged straight from the can. Surrounded by the wall-to-wall carpet and the elegantly panelled walls are not businessmen and politicians, but competitors in the first United States Open Table Hockey Tournament.

This is the big time. The US Open is the eighth major table hockey tournament in the past three years and the richest, with \$2,000 in prize money.

They've come from almost every corner of the continent. They've flown from New York, Montreal and Toronto, driven from Samia and bussed the 1,747 miles from Edmonton. For many, months of preparation have preceded this event.

It's almost midnight; the playdowns to decide the singles winner have been in progress for more than 10 hours. Those still competing have played as many as 20 five-minute table hockey games — 100 minutes of concentrated wrist movements.

Grant Ainsley of Edmonton has won the first three games in his quarter-final round, has lost but one game all day and appears on his way to the semi-finals.

He is an intense competitor, seldom showing emotion, seldom tipping off an opponent to his weaknesses. But his opponents have noticed a weakness — not a mechanical one, but a psychological one.

"You've played him once, Albi," says one onlooker, loud enough to be heard by Ainsley. "He's only got one play. Now you know it."

"The left-wing turnaround slapshot tipped in by the centre," says another. "That's all he's got."

Others pick up the jibes. Ainsley's susceptibility to being psyched out is

beginning to show. In table hockey, handling the pressure is half the battle. Ainsley's patience begins to wear thinner. He starts an argument with the referee. He grips the control knobs tighter, starts making bad plays.

Could it be that he does have only one play?

The psyche job has worked. He loses his last three games and is out of the running, the victim of pressure and the effects of a three-day bus ride.

He and Brian Carp, both students at Victoria Composite High School in Edmonton, got off the bus from Alberta the previous morning after managing only three hours sleep.

"It cost us about \$300 apiece for this," Carp says, adjusting the tape on his wrist. "But it was worth it. We would have been in better shape if we had had more sleep, though."

The pair have been practising four hours a week for the past two months in preparation for this tournament, and both agree that the investment in time and money was worthwhile.

"We came here for a number of reasons," Ainsley says. "Competition, fun, a vacation from school and maybe to prove that we're as good as any of these guys."

"I don't see where they're much better than Brian and I. We got a little mad reading those magazines that said these guys were so good."

Carp and Ainsley are typical of many who travel to the table hockey tournaments. They've heard about the big names and want to prove that they can play as well as anyone.

Allan Ryan, a sportswriter from Toronto, got on the tournament tour the same way.

"It's more a social thing with me now than anything else," he says. "Everybody starts out with their basement league and then maybe a neighborhood league. Then you read that so-and-so has won the World Table Hockey Association championship."

"Your first reaction is outrage. 'What? How can these guys say they're world champs? They haven't played us yet!' So you save up and





Photographs by Nick Paul

go to the next tournament and show 'em. Except you usually find out that these guys really are good."

He smooths out his engineer's cap, chugs on a beer and heads for his room. "I've been to seven tournaments," he adds. "I guess I've won more than I've lost. My problem is that I always end up drinking too much."

In front of another quarter-final game, a member of the Brooklyn Raccoons entertains a radio reporter.

"Oh yeah, we train very hard for this," he deadpans. "Myself, I do isometrics. If you had a camera here I'd demonstrate. It's all a matter of pitting one hand against the other and pushing for a specific period of time..." The reporter nods in understanding.

Table hockey players enjoy playing up to their public image.

John Curran of Montreal is battling New Yorker Mel Friedman in another quarter-final round. Curran is undefeated after five quarter-final games while Friedman has lost just once — to Curran.

Friedman, who recently abandoned wearing a goalie's mask while playing, sprinkles his hands with baby powder. He wishes Curran the best of luck. Curran nods.

"Nice shot," Friedman says as play starts. "Nice touch. Good pass. Ooh, good save!" He, too, is attempting the psyche, but it isn't working. Curran executes play after play, exhibiting championship passing skill. With two minutes left in the game, he scores on a tip-in to advance to the semi-finals.

A 17-year-old student at Dawson College, Curran has as much desire to win this tournament as anyone. He was the victim of an historic fifth-overtime loss to fellow Montrealese Mike Ettinger in the 1974 Canadian Open at Loyola College. He has accomplished much in the world of table hockey in a very short time.

"I've played since I was a kid," he says, "and when I heard about the first tournament at Loyola last year I figured I was pretty good, so I went. But I didn't do too well. I didn't know any plays or anything. These guys were something else."

Spurred by his poor showing at the 1973 Open, Curran worked on his plays in preparation for this year's tourney. After his heart-breaking loss to Ettinger, the eventual champion, he took the earnings from his paper route and headed for Chicago. En route, he ran into the table hockey player's old nemesis — public opinion.

"I sure had trouble going through Customs," he laughs. "The guy just wouldn't believe that I was coming here to play table hockey. I finally had to show him a magazine I had in my suitcase. He let me through, but he was still looking kinda funny at me."

The tournament is at the semi-final stage now with Curran facing Albi Gorn of New York. The other semi-

finalists are Tom McMahon and Greg "44 Thumbs" Muench, younger brother of one of the game's legendary figures, Dean "88 Thumbs" Muench.

It's now past 1:30 AM. The length of the day is beginning to show on the competitors, especially Curran, whose eyes are puffy from 12 and a half hours of table hockey.

Gorn and Curran are contrasts in style. Curran sits while playing, Gorn stands. Curran heralds his goals with a barely-discernible nod, Gorn with a loud clap of his hands and a cheer.

Curran wins the first game 7-2, but Gorn takes the second 4-3. Prior to the start of the third and deciding game, Gorn gets a shoulder massage from Friedman.

"OK, Albi baby," Friedman says, "You got him now."

Curran is alone. Most of the Canadians have long since left. The majority of the spectators are cheering for the American boy.

A tip-in goal early in the first five-minute period gives Curran the lead. Just before the end of the period, a Curran pass ricochets off the boards into Gorn's net. Curran throws his hands up to his eyes, all but apologizing for the goal.

As the second period starts, the pressure is etched more vividly on the faces of the competitors. The winner of this game is guaranteed \$200 and a crack at the \$500 first prize, not to speak of a mention in the annals of table hockey. The loser wins either \$75 or \$25 and the memories of a "messed-it-by-that-much" showing. Many a potential table hockey champ has been ruined by the pressure.

The pair exchange goals early in the second period before Gorn comes within one goal by scoring from the point. Pressure mounts as the third period starts. Both play conservatively, neither willing to take a gamble that could leave a vulnerable opening.

Curran is within a minute and a half of victory when Gorn scores to tie the game. The cheers have barely died when Gorn scores directly from the faceoff. He now leads 4-3.

Faced with the reality of defeat, Curran abandons his defensive play and goes on the attack. He hurls a barrage of shots at Gorn, but the New Yorker is able to turn them all aside.

"A couple of fast goals... they killed me," Curran says after the game. "I'm awfully tired, too... but I'm not using that as an excuse..."

At 3:30, after 14 hours of play, Gorn defeats Muench to win the championship, on sheer endurance if nothing else. His band of supporters are jubilant and plans are hastily being made for a victory party.

"Look, why don't you come up to my room after," says Friedman to one spectator. "I've got a game up there. We can play a few games, have a drink..."

Friedman, a young businessman from New York, is at the tournament to drum up interest in the Professional Table Hockey Association tour he

Continued



## They sweated like real hockey players

plans to open this September in Toronto. He's been referred to as the Gary Davidson of table hockey.

Friedman recently sold his garment business in New York and now claims he has enough money to last him the rest of his life. So he's doing what he likes most — playing table hockey. He also claims that he's got \$100,000 behind him and the 10-city tour he has planned will offer \$50,000 in prizes. Most of table hockey's upper echelon regard him with something more than skepticism.

"Table hockey can make it as a business," he says. "There's no limit to how far it can go. Just look at what the competition does for players. I've been playing for only three years and already I'm great. Another year and nobody will be able to beat me."

Nine hours later, play starts in the doubles tournament, with two players operating the six control knobs instead of one.

At one table a member of the Brooklyn Raccoons cheers on a teammate, honking an old Model T horn every time a goal is scored. One of the Raccoons' opponents, who has just been defeated, tears off his golf glove in disgust.

"I practised for two hours a day for the last month on a Bobby Hull game," he cries. "I can't play on this." Next year, he'll practise on the Coleco game, which is used at the US and Canadian Opens.

At another table, Montrealer Tony Higgins is working out the final details with his partner in the doubles competition. A 19-year-old student at Dawson College, Higgins is one of the new addicts to the game.

"I went to the tournament this year at Loyola," he says, "just for something different. But it didn't work out that way. I went to New York last month and now I'm here, too."

"The people here are so friendly. If you go to one tournament you'll go to two and then three. I know I'm hooked."

The Brooklyn Raccoons are back in action again, with the Ross Avenue Rangers from Sarnia as their opponents. The Rangers, in real life Larry Percival and Bev Fraser, loaded themselves, their uniforms and their wives into a car and drove the 363 miles to Chicago for the tournament. This

is their first taste of big-league table hockey.

"You've got to come to something like this to believe it," says Fraser. "We played one team and these guys were sweating and breathing heavy like they were playing real hockey."

"Some of these guys are a lot better than we thought anyone was," adds Percival. "We figured we were pretty good, so when we saw an ad for the tournament we came down. It was a five-hour drive."

"Besides," Fraser says, "what else is there to do on a weekend?"

Play is starting at another table with Bob Delaney and myself, representing the Miniature Hockey League of Montreal, battling a pair of Chicagoans. I am playing because Delaney's regular partner, Chris "The Phantom" Fernandez was unable to make the trip south. We complete the preliminary round undefeated in five games.

"Great," says Delaney. "This is the first time I've ever had a partner that was hot." Delaney is a 21-year-old physics major at Loyola College and the organizer of what is generally regarded as the classiest table hockey tournament in existence — the Canadian Open.

He planned and worked for more than a year for the 1974 tournament and presented competitors with well-

trained uniformed male referees, female scorekeepers and a set of statistics that would make any professional sport blush. (For instance: the fastest goal ever scored in the Canadian Open play was by Jack "Studs" Fleming of Toronto, after one second of play.)

Why would someone who should know better devote so much time to such a frivolous pastime?

"I enjoy it," he says. "It's gratifying to look at a job well done and be able to say that you did it. Besides, I'm on an ego trip like everyone else."

One of Delaney's goals is to get as much publicity for table hockey as possible. That's the only way to keep it growing, he says.

"Take any random city and you'll find a bunch of nuts playing table hockey in somebody's basement, probably with a schedule, trophies and statistics."

"But all of them think that they're the only nuts in the world who do it. So they get hold of an article on table hockey and realize they aren't. There's nothing more encouraging than finding out you're not the only nut in the world."

Most of the publicity about table hockey is turned out by a New York-based hockey magazine called Action Sports Hockey. Its publisher, 44-year-old Robert Stampleman, is

## The outside story.



## Bright.

14 - Weekend Magazine, May 25, 1974

recognized as one of the fathers of organized table hockey. The other is its co-editor, Stan Fischler, and both have been honored by having trophies for the US Open named after them.

Stampleman, who was raised in Montreal, is a close-shaven, short-haired executive who is always the only person wearing a business suit at table hockey tournaments. He's the game's token establishment type.

He, Fischler, and a handful of friends held an unofficial world championship in Fischler's apartment six years ago and within two years it had grown so large, they had to move the tournament to a New York hotel.

"The whole thing started out as a social event," he explains. "But it just grew and grew until it got out of hand."

The four tournament organizers in New York, Montreal, Chicago and Detroit have recently formed an alliance of sorts. Their tournaments will operate under a standard set of rules and a referees' association has been created. The four groups have mailing lists with over 1,000 names.

But despite Friedman's claims, a professional tour seems to be beyond reality.

"I can see more and bigger tournaments and possibly a world championship," Stampleman says. "But pro table hockey — no way. Even big

prize money is all but impossible. To have the money for that sort of thing, you need spectators — lots of them.

"And table hockey is just not a spectator sport."

It is a participation sport, though, the type of activity anyone with able wrists and a penchant for the off-beat can enjoy.

The phenomenal growth of table hockey in the past three years has turned into a bonanza for manufacturers. Coleco, Canada, Limited reported an increase in sales of more than 50 percent in 1972. Brian Clarke, executive vice-president of Coleco, says that sales should increase by at least 25 percent this year. The largest growth has occurred in the sales of the expensive table models — the type used by serious table hockey players.

Munro Games, which supplies the WTHA with games for its tournaments, has experienced similar increases. Munro is making a determined effort to make its model the regulation game for all tournaments.

It's now past 9 o'clock and, as expected, the team of Mark Abkowitz and David Feinberg from Lexington, Massachusetts, has won the doubles championship. They've beaten everyone; Carp and Ainsley, Percival and Fraser, and yes, even Delaney and myself have fallen. It's really nothing new.

Abkowitz and Feinberg have not lost a doubles tournament in the last two years.

The ballroom starts to clear. Carp and Ainsley are heading for the bus terminal for another three days on the road. Percival and Fraser are on a highway somewhere between Chicago and Sarnia. Jim Alderdice is on his way back to Nelson, BC. Others are heading for hotel rooms, friends' houses and the airport.

Tournament organizers have started folding up games and cleaning up the room, getting it back into convention shape. Friedman is still here, soliciting members for the PTHA.

And Cliff Whitehorn, an unemployed Torontonians, is talking about the plans he has for the Canadian Table Hockey Association and its mid-April tournament at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto.

"I don't like working at anything else," he says. "Right now, I'm doing nothing but trying to get our table hockey company going."

Rolling a cigarette and pausing pensively, he intones, "I just want to do my thing, so I can let table hockey do its thing." He looks me straight in the eye. "I take table hockey seriously," he says. ◀

Chris Zelkovich is a writer living in Montreal.

### Where To Write For Tournament Information

#### CANADIAN OPEN

[Loyola College, Montreal]  
Miniature Hockey League,  
12 Fourth Ave. S.,  
Roxboro, Que. H8Y 2M2

#### CTHA

[Toronto]  
236 Broadway Ave.,  
Toronto, Ont. M4P 1V9

#### US OPEN

[Chicago]  
Rick Sorci,  
730 N. Hicks Rd.,  
Palatine, Illinois 60067

#### MAESTRO CUP

[Detroit]  
Sidney Stutz,  
2432 Crooks Rd., Apt. 37,  
Troy, Michigan 48064

#### PTHA

[10 cities, including Montreal  
and Toronto]  
Box 2838,  
Grand Central Stn.,  
New York, New York 10017

## The inside story.



Beautiful.

This is Duster style. Smart looking sports coupe with a solid feel, and torsion bars for smooth handling. Inside, Duster Caravan Special is something else again. With super caravan striped interior that is bound to brighten your driving hours. And like every Plymouth built in North America, our small sassy new Plymouth Duster Caravan Special is economical and has sure-starting Electronic Ignition.

**Plymouth  
Duster  
Caravan  
Special**

Weekend Magazine, May 25, 1974 - 15