

Table Tennis is alive and well in San Antonio

By Marvin Pfeiffer - Staff Writer/North Central News
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Name a sport that you can start playing when you're 6 years old and keep playing well into your 90s. One that has a low risk of injury, is not subject to weather conditions (it's played indoors) and is affordable to nearly everyone.

Give up? That would be table tennis, a sport that worldwide is second only to soccer in the number of individual participants and one that most of you have played at one time or another.

Thanks to the San Antonio Table Tennis Club, it can be found here in the Alamo city.

The club has been around in one form or another since 1965, when its oldest member, Arthur "Buster" Chase, 92, moved to San Antonio from Amarillo.

Chase learned the game after joining a local table tennis club at an Amarillo YMCA. As his love for the game grew, Chase ventured out with friends to play tournaments in Denver, Albuquerque, N.M. and San Antonio. When he came to San Antonio at age 48, he continued to pursue his hobby.

Since that time, Chase has won many national and international matches. He recently brought home three gold medals for the 80-and-over, 85-and-over and the 90-and-over age group competitions at the Meiklejohm National Seniors Tournament in Laguna Hills, Calif.

"I moved down here in '65 and joined a club with Louis Scharlack," Chase said. "He was the owner of Southern Jewelry and Southern Music. He was the national champion over-45 then and it took me three years, I think, to beat the guy."

They played at Scharlack's residence near Trinity University, according to Chase, until he died in 1974. The club then played in various places around town until 1991 when it found a home at the Jewish Community Center when it was located near North Star Mall

As the Jewish Community Center moved a bit northward, so did the club until this past April, when several members split off to find a new home at the Alamo Gymnastics Center at 16675 Huebner Road. Other club members soon followed and, since the move, the club has elected new board officers, incorporated, launched a Web site and began its current expansion.

SATTC began hosting volunteer table tennis instruction for children of the fitness center members and, last fall, held its first round of team play. Another one or two rounds of team play are planned for next January to last for 10 weeks each, according to club secretary Loren Williams.

On Nov. 15, the club held its first tournament at the new location – the San Antonio City Table Tennis Championships with \$600 in total prizes for the open singles division and trophies for the other classifications. Thirty-six people competed.

Though the sport on the surface might appear to be the same unchanged through the years, Chase has observed some major changes along the way.

"Well, before the sponge came out with tacky rubber on the surface of it, it was a slow game more or less," Chase said. "But that sponge and that tacky rubber puts a spin on the ball. That came along and it changed the whole game."

He also said the loop stroke was another major innovation in the game.

"We had a guy from Lackland (Air Force Base) during the Vietnamese war," Chase said. "He came from Vietnam and table tennis was big over there. He came up with 'the loop.' We had never seen it before, with that tacky rubber. We didn't have a chance against him. He just spun us off the table. And so the loop became big in Texas."

The loop, Chase explained, is a shot where you "skim the ball from way back – the good ones go almost to the floor. The ball goes over with that spin and it just dips down on the table. You can hit it as hard as you want to and it'll still stay on the table. It changed the whole game."

Chase also notes the recent domination by the Chinese and the Swedes as changes in the worldwide table tennis landscape. "The sport has really changed," Chase said. "It used to be ping pong truly. Now it's table tennis – a game."

Though the club has expanded a great deal recently, it stills sees room for improvement. Williams said the club plans to build its own facility.

"A dedicated facility is the ultimate answer," Williams said. "The Austin club is our role model and they moved into their new building in April of this year. They have 16 tables and we have six."

Williams also would like to see a larger turnout from locally based military personnel.

Club information can be obtained at www.satabletennis.org or by calling Alamo Gymnastics at 479-8282.



Thanh Lee returns a shot in the San Antonio Table Tennis Club city tournament Nov. 15 at the Alamo Gymnastics Center. Lee placed first in the open singles division.

Photo by Marvin Pfeiffer