

Dr. Daniel Amen on the best brain sport, from New York Times article.

Table Tennis

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Published: September 2, 2006

“As the United States Open continues this week, all eyes are on Andre Agassi, who at the ripe old age of 36 has announced that this will be his last hurrah in competitive tennis. But what about that other tennis game? You know, the one that’s played on a table and, according to the International Olympic Committee, happens to be the world’s largest participation sport.

In the United States we call the sport Ping-Pong, and we relegate it to the attics and basements of our nation. But what most of us don’t know is that there are hundreds of millions of casual players and 40 million competitive table tennis players worldwide. That means more people played in a table tennis tournament last year than live in the state of California. For a game that started as a distraction for monks in 11th century France — using a hairball and homemade leather mitts — that’s a lot of pong.

So why doesn’t America care? Why don’t we root for international table tennis living legends like Werner Schlager of Austria and Timo Boll of Germany with the same enthusiasm we reserve for, say, Maria Sharapova? O.K., bad example, but you know what I mean. The answer is simple. Table tennis is the most un-American of American sports.

For one, table tennis knows no age or shape. We fancy our athletes as the lightning-fast, preternaturally strong crest of human evolution. Table tennis is about hand quickness. It is about how fast you can shuffle your feet from one end of the table to the other. Size and date of birth don’t matter in table tennis. At the last United States Nationals I watched a large, middle-aged man rally with a little girl in an official match. And sorry to tell you this, Andre, but the reigning men’s United States champion is 38 years old. Of course, the problem is that, in America, you can’t put a 38-year-old’s face on a billboard or a cereal box.

Table tennis is also nonviolent. There are no neck-breaking collisions, no chance of a human bursting into flames. The only sports-induced widows in table tennis are those who lose their spouses to the table tennis hall each week. The biggest smash-ups are between a 40-millimeter celluloid ball flying 70 miles per hour and a pad of compressed sponge and rubber. No, if table tennis had play-by-play announcers they would not make metaphors relating table tennis to any battlefield or warlike activity. Table tennis is more Zen than blood sport, and we know how Americans love to see blood.

In addition, there are no drugs — at least as far as we know — in table tennis. Any American sport worth the price of admission has a drug issue. Unfortunately for its popularity, according to the tournament director of North American Table Tennis, the sport is squeaky clean. Table tennis also can keep you fit and active your entire life. We Americans prefer sports like football and baseball that we quit the day we graduate from high school. What most people don’t realize is that table tennis, if played the right way, makes you sweat — a lot. Ron Joseph, a professional body builder, uses table tennis as his primary means of conditioning.

Table tennis can even help keep your brain fit. In his book “Making a Good Brain Great,” Daniel G. Amen argues that playing table tennis can increase brain activity.

And then there’s the issue of money. There are no million-dollar prizes. There are only a few commercially endorsed players in America, and they don’t get much more than a pair of shorts and a few paddles every year. What sane-headed American parents would steer their children to a sport that can’t make them rich?

Over the next month at halls across America, there will be serious table tennis tournaments. There won’t be camera crews, and there’s almost no chance that an athlete will purposely break his paddle over his knee as Dmitry Tursunov once did to his racket during a tennis match. Should the average basement player show up to play, expecting to dominate the game, he will be beaten, and probably badly.

But Americans should consider turning off their televisions and resisting the temptation to watch the millionaire athletes who will be dancing across the courts of Flushing over the next several days. They should actually do the sweating themselves and help make table tennis accepted in the one country in which it is ignored.”