



Racquet Sports

For These Friends, a New Table Tennis Venue Solves the Puzzle

BY KENT OSWALD

Can you capture the intimacy that makes a game special within a cavernous 13,000 square feet of commercial space? That's the challenge for the two partners in the recently opened Westchester Table Tennis Center—*New York Times* crossword puzzle editor Will Shortz and former Caribbean table tennis champion and Barbados Olympian Robert Roberts.

Shortz (above, right) and Roberts (left) are gambling on a shared passion and the wave of interest in “ping pong” that has seen 10-year participation growth of 53 percent to about 19.5 million core players and \$46 million in revenues, according to a 2011 Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association Participation Study. Then there's the celebrity attention table tennis is getting, for instance, with actress Susan Sarandon and partners rolling out their SPiN parlors around the world, mixing a bar scene and the thwack, click, thwack, of a hollow, gas-filled celluloid ball speeding and spinning from rubber paddle to coated table top to paddle and back.

The pleasure Shortz and Roberts take in the sport is obvious as the two friends set up catty-corner to rally for a few minutes across one of the 18 Double Happiness Rainbow tables that help set their Pleasantville, N.Y., parlor far apart from the game's clichéd basement venues. Not as immediately clear is whether the financial gamble to create a table tennis emporium catering to everyone from novice to international paddle master will pay off.

Shortz, star of the 2006 movie “Wordplay,” bought a half interest in the

entire 40,000-square-foot building housing businesses ranging from a print shop to a martial arts school before opening the club. “It's crazy as an investment,” he explains, “[but] it works for me.”

In addition to more top-of-the-line tables than any other American club, the \$750,000 investment prior to opening included new air conditioning, splitting the space into a main room and five-table “party” room, men's and women's showers, lockers, storage space for bleachers to come out during tournament play, and setting aside space for a pro shop to be stocked with high-end equipment from all the major manufacturers and a café.

The club opens every day from early afternoon to late evening. The year-one membership goal—about halfway

partners first met and where Roberts first began to coach Shortz.

Some area teens have already begun to make the club part of their after-school day and, as the club sits minutes from the train station, a few top amateurs had already made the trip up from NYC in the very first days after the doors opened. Additional players are being sought through school exhibitions and by reaching out to local colleges with aspirations to engage in the growing intercollegiate club play.

Roberts, who gained his international stature despite a late start in the game at 13, says that one of his main goals is that, “I would like to get a lot of kids involved in the sport.” He also talks about making the club a training center for those in the area desiring to play at the sport's highest level. (To this end, the club has hired Rawle Alleyne, the former Barbados national team coach.) Monday nights are “beginner's nights,” Tuesday's are for “kids,” and there are current training programs both for young players and the elderly.

A four-star tournament featuring international players and a \$3,000 first prize purse is planned for early fall, as is one for area high school and college players. A key to success for both the tournaments and the club will be corporate sponsorships.

Despite the business requirements, neither partner seems overwhelmed by the money hunt. They are both in it for love of the game, the people, and the friendships. Says Shortz, “I don't want to lose the whole reason for starting the club.”



achieved within two months of opening—is 300, with adults paying \$300 and under-20s \$200 for unlimited play. A day's play is also available for \$10 (\$7 for students).

The base is expected to be the River-towns Table Tennis Club—a nomadic 100-plus group who for years shifted nightly through Westchester County, N.Y., venues—in whose membership the two