

King Pong

Retired surgeon reacquaints Mather residents with fun way to exercise



Lives by the Lake

BUZZ AND BOB EXPLORE EVANSTON

By BOB SEIDENBERG

bseidenberg@pioneerlocal.com

Bob Gluckman has some work to do on his backhand. He'd also like to get his forearm cut to fall. "And speed," he said, adding to the list of improvements. "I think speed is important."

Gluckman, a retired psychiatrist, is 90.

He is one of a growing number of seniors who meet in a room just off the lobby at the new Mather, 425 Davis St., on Monday afternoons. They are honing their skills in table tennis, a game some haven't played since their youth.

Dr. Tom Soper, a resident of the retirement community, began lobbying for a ping-pong table after The Mather opened in October, recalling his experience on cruise ships.

On cruise ships, "there are always a bunch of seniors around the table," said Soper.

A retired surgeon, Soper ap-

proached Sara McVey, Mather's experience director, and she was immediately receptive to the idea.

"In a lot of the things that go on here, the people who live here are creating the programs themselves," explained Mather spokesman Stuart Greenblatt.

Slow start

Soper, trim and looking athletic, said he encountered some reluctance when he began inviting residents to take part in the sessions.

"They'll say, 'I haven't played in 50 years,' that kind of thing," said Soper, whose skills are such that he easily schooled reporters. "After they hit for a while they'll suddenly begin to get it. It's fun and decent exercise."

Seniors stand around or watch from chairs, sometimes throwing out words of praise or encouragement or just picking up the plastic orange balls as they run onto the carpet.

Trash talk? Not a lot, unless playing well for one's age qualifies.

Making friends

In addition to new skills, said Joan Soper, Tom's wife, "he created new friendships."

Turning to the table, "I mean I've never seen these four playing together, but it seems to be the beginning of a new relationship."

Mary Potts, 78, had never played



Dr. Tom Soper helps Mary Potts with her topspin hit while playing ping-pong in the senior living center of The Mather in Evanston. Soper has introduced residents to the game. (Buzz Orr/Staff Photographer)

until Soper encouraged her.

"He started to teach me how to handle a paddle and everything and he's very patient," she said.

"It gives you more of a workout than you would think, in going back and forth, swinging your arms," she said. "You really use a lot of your torso, too."

Soper said some of the players have shown great improvement from the first time they hit. He leads them patiently through the basics.

High tech

A rather strange looking contraption, Robo Pong, is sometimes pressed into service. The machine shoots out balls to players so they can practice their strokes.

"It shoots balls at you at 70 miles an hour if you want," he said, adding: "Of course, we don't do that. I make it super slow."

He usually brings a DVD or something else special to a session to educate seniors about the sport.



Dr. Bob Gluckman (right) and Leona Rudin use a practice machine to hone their table tennis strokes at The Mather senior living center in Evanston. (Buzz Orr/Staff Photographer)



Dr. Bob Gluckman (near left) and Leona Rudin (near right) play ping-pong against Mary Potts (far left) and Peter Horne at The Mather senior living center. (Buzz Orr/Staff Photographer)

On a recent Monday, he showed a DVD of the gold medal match at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, where the two Chinese players were blasting shots at each other in furious volleys.

Leona Rudin, in her 80s, turned

her game a notch up after that one.

"I've got to hit it harder and faster," she said. "I mean, if that's the way to go, I'm going to go that way too."

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