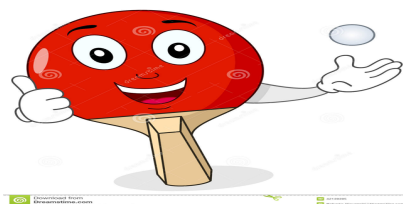


## TABLE TENNIS GROUP

Report by Peter Singer



We continue to enjoy our weekly Friday table tennis sessions at the Teesdale Leisure Centre, when anything from four to twelve of us gather to do battle over two tables (and fortunately a couple of benches for occasional rests). There is also a certain amount of important information exchange (okay, catching up on holidays, books, entertainment and life generally), but this does not interfere with playing the game.

Our standard of play has gradually been improving and games are keenly contested. Most of our serves (the only shot that is completely in the control of the player) now find the mark, although we are all occasionally caught out by a mysterious and random shrinking of the table, causing the ball to fly long or wide. Whether this is due to a manufacturing fault, climate change or hallucinations brought on by excessive exertion remains to be determined, but we keep calm and paddle on as best we can (paddle is an alternative term for a table tennis bat). The net can also be a troublesome obstacle and comments have been heard on the ancestry of whoever thought of putting it there in the first place.

In the main, however, more of our rallies now extend to several shots and are quite exciting (well, to us anyway). The longest point in history was in a match during the 1936 World Championships in Prague, between Poland and Romania, when a rally for the opening point lasted for 2 hours and 12 minutes!! Alex Erlich of Poland was known as the King of the Chiselers and “chiselers” in table tennis are players who play only defensive shots and wait for their opponent to make a mistake. Both players suffered physically during the rally and after 85 minutes even the umpire had to be replaced because his neck had seized up.

As a consequence, the International Table Tennis Federation introduced the “expedite rule”, which limited a single game to a maximum of 20 minutes. In 1961, this was reduced to 15 minutes and in 2001 (when the scoring was changed from 21 points to 11 points), the limit was reduced again to 10 minutes, which is where it remains. This is probably not a rule that we will ever need to apply, as exhaustion or boredom are likely to kick in well before the time limit. Anyway, we play primarily for fun after all and cannot pretend to bother too much about the minutiae (what was that rule again?).

Incidentally, it is heartening to read that a team of four Ukrainian players made it to the recent WTT Star Contender event in Doha and, on 28 March, met the ITTF officials assisting and supporting table tennis players in Ukraine. Tetyana Bilenko said “when we were playing our matches here in Qatar...we didn’t think about the war. It was nice to be back in the sporting community and with many friends.” So, a welcome, albeit small, ray of sunshine from the world of table tennis in these terrible times.