

## TABLE TENNIS GROUP

Report by Peter Singer



Friday afternoons are a good time to play table tennis, as the pent-up frustrations accumulated during the week (waiting for BT to answer the phone; watching the news; seeing another piece knocked off the Buttermarket) can be released in a wild topspin smash or deceptively wobbly serve. Time spent in a friendly group with a common interest and a shared sense of the absurd is also a therapeutically relaxing way to start the weekend. In any event, we generally enjoy our exploits around the ping pong table and any loud cries of “TGIF” heard reverberating around Teesdale could well be members of our group wending their way to the leisure centre for their weekly workout. For most of us, our play is a bit like the curate’s egg – good in parts – but overall the intention is to have fun and we usually succeed in that.

On a broader stage, Matthew Syed’s always interesting podcast *Sideways* (available on BBC Sounds), has recently included a fascinating three-part mini series entitled “China’s Ping Pong Power”, which tells the story of how the humble game of table tennis transformed China’s international standing. Syed, who was himself an Olympic table tennis player for Great Britain, describes table tennis as a mesmerising combination of strategy and speed, rather like running the 100 metres and playing chess at the same time (he obviously hasn’t seen us play!). His series investigates the rise of Chinese table tennis, with Rong Guotuan, who won the 1959 world championships and was China’s first world champion in any sport and Zhuang Zedong, who won the title three times in the 1970s. Chairman Mao was himself a keen player and was persuaded by Ivor Montague, who wrote the rules of the game and founded the International Table Tennis Federation, before becoming a Russian spy (really), that table tennis could be used to promote China’s interests in the world. This became known as ping pong diplomacy and is credited with laying the ground work for Kissinger’s secret trip to China to discuss the future of Taiwan, China joining the UN Security Council and the thawing of relations that led to Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. An extraordinary tale and a world away from our Friday afternoon antics.

If you would like to join our group to learn the game, improve your skills or just have a bit of fun, please contact Peter Singer ([pandjsinger@btinternet.com](mailto:pandjsinger@btinternet.com) 07508 663998). All are welcome, whether you play regularly, have not played for some time or have never played before.