

Ping-Pong as the Fountain of Youth



I returned home the other night exhausted, quadriceps aching, twinges in my foot, salty with sweat. My husband asked me how my evening was.

Glorious, I told him.

I had spent 90 minutes in a gym crammed with 10 Ping-Pong tables and assorted players, all coaxing and smacking a little ball over the net. By 9 p.m., I was exhilarated, depleted, triumphant. I had beaten two young men half my age and lost battles against worthy opponents. To a casual observer, the night was unremarkable. To me, it was a miracle.

I had taken up Ping-Pong during college, and in my 30s dove in more deeply, climbing the long stairway up to a table tennis center in Westfield, N.J., where I watched Olympic hopefuls and took lessons. Arthroscopy for torn knee cartilage soon sidelined me. Shortly afterward, a distracted driver made an illegal turn at a pedestrian crossing and drove directly into my bum knee.

Joint replacements are a poor bet for 30-somethings. The surgeon did his best to repair my crushed knee, inserted a titanium screw, recommended I stay slim, advised against afternoons of power shopping, and told me never to jog or run again.

Three months in a cast left my atrophied foot floppy and useless. Standing was excruciating. I hunted for shoes that could cushion my knee and set my sights on walking and climbing stairs again. Years later, I tried to play Ping-Pong and limped for a week. I put the game out of my mind.

When I was 53, a new challenge arrived. A dimple in my right breast proved malignant, so I underwent lumpectomy, followed by chemotherapy and radiation. By treatment's end, clothing felt intolerable, and a stroll around the block winded me. My old knee injury hurt anew; flesh around the scar felt fragile as old rubber bands.

But I wanted to start fresh. I quit eating barbecue, shunned dairy, embraced kale. I attended therapy and a support group. At a \$450 course in mindfulness-based stress reduction, I learned to befriend painful stretches and breathe new life into atrophied muscles without injuring myself.

One day my bad leg was working slightly better. The knee hadn't been oppressively swollen in a while. I felt a flicker of hope.

Could Ping-Pong be feasible for me, now — in my condition, at my age?

Ping-Pong, or table tennis as it is officially known, is [one of the fastest racket sports](#), requiring muscular and cardiorespiratory endurance. Players need nimble footwork and upper body flexibility to return [balls that can fly over 60 miles per hour](#), demanding faster response times than tennis or badminton. While [energy expenditure tables](#) list the sport as requiring four METS of energy, about the same as archery or bowling, skilled players can peak at 11.7 METs during a match, said Alessandro Moura Zagatto, a sports physiologist and researcher at São Paulo State University in Brazil. That's a workout comparable to intense racquetball or moderate rowing.

Ping-Pong's unique visual and spatial demands, strategy requirements and vigor may even offer benefits for the brain. A [study of 164 Korean women](#) age 60 and older showed that table tennis improved cognitive function more than dancing, walking, gymnastics or resistance training. Other [research suggests Ping-Pong](#) may ease attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder.

“The great thing about our sport is it can be played by anyone,” said Jimmy Butler, a four-time national USA Table Tennis Association champion who overcame a debilitating muscle condition in his 20s and 30s to reclaim the title at age 44. “I see 90-year-olds and 10-year-olds.”

Four years after completing radiation therapy, I set out to make my own Ping-Pong dream a reality. First requirement: clothing that didn't irritate hypersensitive skin. Silk shell and organic cotton sports bra, check. Second requirement: footwear that didn't accidentally torque a damaged knee. White bowling shoes, check.

My performance goals were realistic: Just be good enough that other players were willing to rally with me. No diving for crazy shots. Remember how to sweat.

I arrived at my local table tennis club cautiously, a breathtakingly out-of-shape woman in a sea of men, some in their 20s, a handful over 80. A man with a kind face invited me to hit with him. After 20 minutes I wilted, but went home happy. My knee didn't implode.

I returned the following week, hit balls, lost matches. I fumbled with scorekeeping, but who cared about points? Just by playing I felt like a winner.

It soon became obvious that I needed to remember mindfulness while at the table. I got too easily distracted by shouts from my opponent or stray balls flying wildly from other tables. I had to stay focused on the little ball. Keep alert to spin. Don't rush the attack.

Months passed, and almost imperceptibly, my stamina improved. Opponents started to compliment my shots. I won a game. I assumed it was a fluke. Then it happened again.

These days, slamming aces feels wonderful. I keep a water bottle nearby as sweat rolls off me. I stop when tired and praise my flimsy knee for its good work.

Some nights I play so joyfully, I can almost believe this sport is the fountain of youth.

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A Guide to Aging Well

Looking to grow old gracefully? We can help.

- Getting older is inevitable (and certainly better than the alternative). Here's how to [keep your body tuned up and your mind tuned in](#).
- The sweet spot for a [longer life](#) lies around 7,000 steps a day (or 30 minutes of exercise).
- Small changes in your eating habits can lower your risk for many diseases associated with aging. [These five tips can get you started](#).
- Our hair goes through [myriad changes](#) as we age. Here are answers to some [questions you might have about it](#).
- If you wear makeup, [these two looks](#) — one for the day, one for the night — showcase the best application techniques for mature skin.
- To embrace aging, you may have to change your mindset. Learn from Jane Brody's [new approach to growing old](#).
- Age in place by reconfiguring your living space to [make your home safer and more comfortable](#).

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