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# Two Table Tennis Obsessives Go Back and Forth

By Will Shortz

*This week's Look features table-tennis pictures collected by the photographer Alec Soth, an avid player of the game. The images appear in the book "Ping Pong," which Soth's publishing enterprise, Little Brown Mushroom, put out this month. We asked Will Shortz, the crossword editor of The New York Times — and the owner of the Westchester Table Tennis Center, in Pleasantville, N.Y., who says he has played in tennis table clubs in 43 of the country's states — to interview Alec about the book and their shared love of the game.*

**Will Shortz:** I understand you have a Ping-Pong table in your studio. Why? And how often do you play?

**Alec Soth:** Ping-pong tables are invaluable workspaces. I remember my mom using ours to wrap Christmas presents. So when I was finally able to have my own studio, I knew I wanted one. They are perfect for laying out photographs for editing. My employees and I also use it as a lunch table. But at 4:45 every day, the food and photographs are cleared off, and we play. I have two primary competitors in my studio. We're all at about the same level. Each day's champion gets to put a vintage trophy on his desk until the next day's competition. I'm happy to report that the trophy is on my desk as we speak.

**W.S.:** Congratulations. My family had a Ping-Pong table in our recreation room when I was growing up in Indiana, so I played a lot as a kid. I still have trophies from high school. In 2001 I joined a club near where I live now in New York, and gradually I became obsessed. Now I own my own club and play every day — literally. I've missed only one day of play since Christmas 2011 (on Oct. 3, 2012), and I'm trying not to miss a single day in 2013. What do you think it is about table tennis that makes us obsessed?

**A.S.:** That is incredible. Will, you are my hero! I don't want to sound too New Agey, but my interest in Ping-Pong has an almost spiritual quality. When I play, it is the one time of the day when I get to shut my brain off and live in the moment. The speed of the game forces me to stop worrying about all of my daily neurotic crap. It seems as purifying as meditation or Yoga. Maybe the Ping-Pong club is the new secular temple.

**W.S.:** I feel the same way. When I'm playing table tennis, the rest of the world disappears. I'm completely engrossed in making my body return a Ping-Pong ball in a way that makes my opponent miss. When I'm done, I'm relaxed, refreshed and energized — ready to get back to everything else in life. People solve crosswords to get that feeling. But since puzzles are my work, I distract myself with table tennis.

Tell me about your book. How did you collect the old photos in it? Are you a big buyer on eBay? And if I bid on an old Ping-Pong photo on eBay, will I likely be bidding against you?

**A.S.:** Ha. Yes, for the last few years, I've been the pre-eminent collector of Ping-Pong pictures on eBay. But the publication of the book marks the end, hopefully, of that obsession. God knows I have enough pictures. The book shows only a fraction of my collection. I love the pictures and loved acquiring them, but that alone wasn't enough to make a book. I needed to energize it somehow ... I needed players! A while ago I learned that the great British author, Geoff Dyer, was not only an expert on photography but was also a big fan of table tennis. So I asked Geoff to write something. In his first draft, he mentioned an ongoing competition with his fellow writer Pico Iyer. With that, I realized I had structure for the book: two writers having a dialog about the game they love.

It's funny what you said about table tennis being a distraction from your puzzle-master duties. My job, photography, like Geoff's and Pico's writing, is considered by most to be an avocation. Perhaps Ping-Pong is the hobby for professional hobbyists.

**W.S.:** I like that. But table tennis is also a brain sport, so the love of mental exercise may actually be the connecting factor. Even when we're not working, we can't turn our brains off. All sorts of people play table tennis, but it especially attracts computer programmers (lots of those), writers, financial analysts, doctors, actors, even carpenters and building contractors. It's actually an interesting group to hang out with.

Last question: Are you up for a match sometime?

**A.S.:** I was afraid you were going to ask. A few years ago I started thinking I was hot stuff. While visiting my parents in Sarasota, I visited a table-tennis club where a 70-year-old woman wiped the floor with me. That was when I learned that there are endless levels to the game. Actually, it was the second time. In 2008 I visited Beijing before the Olympics. I was taken to a school where little kids were being rigorously trained as future table-tennis Olympians.

I have never had a single lesson and suspect I have a hundred bad habits. That said, it would be an honor to play against you. I just hope I don't have to bring my trophy — I'd never see it again.

**W.S.:** If table tennis were easy, it wouldn't be fun. I know I'll never master the game, which is part of what keeps me playing it.

It would be a pleasure to face off with you sometime, somewhere. I look forward to this.