

As the 2007-08 NCTTA season has come to a close, there are a few teams worthy of special mention because of their accomplishments as new collegiate teams. The NCTTA has gained 24 new schools this season, an excellent expansion of the collegiate game, consistent with the sport's continual growth in the United States. Three teams in their first year were able to win at least one of the two division tournaments, and compete in the NCTTA National Championships. Those are Mississippi College, Universidad de Puerto Rico, and California State University at East Bay. The leader of each of these teams told me a bit about their club; a brief summary of their stories follow. In light of their tremendous performance as a second-year school, I've also included a short bio of the University of Minnesota team.

Congratulations to the national runner-up Princeton and the 2008 NCTTA National Champions, Texas Wesleyan.

Matt Holden

The NCTTA Newsletter

From the Heartland of the Sport to the Top of the NCTTA



Mississippi College

As their team of all Chinese players might indicate, Mississippi College has a table tennis program built upon outstanding international student resources. The college's recruiting office in China has helped bring in the 330 international students that now attend MC. Students come from countries like China, India, and Nepal, where table tennis is most popular. It took Ken Qiu, organizer of the club and talented player, to seek out and unite the international talent on campus.

In the summer of 2007, Ken began to network with other college table tennis clubs in the Jackson, Mississippi area. He learned more about the NCTTA and decided to take a team to the fall regional tournament, spearheaded by himself and Jie Zhou. Both players had success at the tournament, but MC took second to Mississippi State University. The team was in need of a third higher-level player. They found just what they were looking for when Haijing Wu joined the team this spring. Now with three outstanding players, the team improved and was able to clinch their division at the spring regional by beating every opponent either 4-1 or 5-0, thus securing their trip to nationals.

Though Ken says it is hard to start a new table tennis program at an old southern school like Mississippi College, the club has enjoyed more attention and support in light of their latest accomplishment – making it to nationals in their first year with the NCTTA. The Mississippi College players are currently working to get even more support in the student body and in the community, and finished 14th at the national championships. “Hopefully what we do can help promote one of the best Olympic sports, table tennis, in the Jackson, Mississippi area,” said Ken.

The Not-So-New Kids on the Block



Universidad de Puerto Rico

Though in its first year with the NCTTA, the table tennis program at the Universidad de Puerto Rico has a history dating to the early '80s. It was not until this past fall that the club decided to get involved with American collegiate table tennis.

For nearly 30 years, UPR has been competing with other Puertorrican university clubs in what's called the Liga Atletica Interuniversitaria (LAI), similar to the United States' NCTTA. Because of the sport's immense popularity and support in Puerto Rico, UPR's players train as full-time athletes and receive full scholarships to pay for tuition, books, meals, and table tennis equipment.

UPR players prepare for competition with preseason and in-season training. Men's coach Joel Alvarado divides preseason training into what he calls "off the table" preparation, including weight lifting and long distance runs, and "on the table" preparation, focusing on technique work with spin, speed, and control. In-season training drills players on principles like strategy, tactics, and different in-game situations.

In addition to scholarships and top-notch training, the LAI team finals receive full television coverage. "All that creates an environment of great motivation for our players to continue training and studying hard," said Coach Alvarado.

This year, UPR sent the best athletes from its 15-player club to compete in the NCTTA's Florida division. After winning both semester regionals, the team advanced to nationals with high hopes. Their stellar 3rd place finish fulfilled the team's season goal of ranking among the top four schools in the nation. Coach Alvarado looks to the future: "We are working very hard on our training and recruiting programs to become a real menace to the reign of the Texas Wesleyan team."

Look out next year, Rams.

No Place to Play but Rochester



California State University, East Bay

What started about two years ago as just a few friends getting together to play table tennis has turned into a surprisingly talented CSU Eastbay table tennis team. Much like Mississippi College, a lot of talent was floating around the CSUEB campus when Henry Sit, president of the table tennis club, and his friends, decided to gather the best players and organize a club. The club now consists of about 30 players, including a coach, many of who are 1600+ level players.

The club practices at area athletic clubs outside of the university, which provides limited hours of practice time for the club to play at their facility. Henry said of the university, "They seem to be holding us back. Since they think other sports are much more important than table tennis, we are always the last to get a say."

Even so, the CSUEB team has managed to win their division and advance to nationals in their premier season with the NCTTA. "We did not think we could make it to the championship, so this is a big surprise for us," said Henry. The team competed with some of the best collegiate table tennis teams in the country and performed well at the championships in Rochester, MN, finishing 15th in the nation. Perhaps their success will bring more support from the school.

Henry attributes their achievement: "I guess the golden rule to success is to get together and keep practicing; we never turn down a challenge, and we never give up."

Precarious Champions



University of Minnesota

In just its second season with the NCTTA, the University of Minnesota's table tennis team has transformed itself from a blip on the radar into a colossal national competitor. All four of the team members that competed so fiercely in NCTTA tournaments this season are new to Minnesota's team this year.

The current team was started when Thor Truelson, now the team's coach, organized his son Anders Truelson and Ming Curran in hopes of finding more players and starting a team. The 17-year-old Anders dropped out of high school to attend classes at the University of Minnesota. Ming, 18, is a high school student enrolled in the university's post-secondary program. These two young players teamed up to win the under 4200 doubles event at the U.S. Closed in December, as well as the Minnesota state doubles title in January. Anders won the state title over Ming. Last summer, the two trained in Tokyo with Coach Thor, and their work has paid off as they led the team to the national championships this year.

The second half of Minnesota's lineup consists of graduate students Shi-wei Zhu and Anh Ngo, both 1900+ level players, who Coach Thor heard about and picked up shortly after organizing Anders and Ming. Because the team is made up of two high school-aged students who may go elsewhere to continue their college education, and two graduate students who will soon move on to begin their careers, the club is in a precarious position. Coach Thor explains, "Without people who are actually more ingrained in the school rallying around ping pong, this will probably all be gone within a couple years." With a team built upon four players alone, all of who may not be around for long, passing the torch for University of Minnesota table tennis may indeed be a difficult task. Still, the team's remarkable success must be stirring new interest in collegiate table tennis at the University of Minnesota.

To prepare for competition, Ming, Anders, and Anh often play at Coach Thor's mother's house located on Lake Harriet in south Minneapolis, which has become known as the "Lake Harriet Dojo." This low-ceiling training area, reminiscent of a scene from *Balls of Fury*, is the place where the Truelsons first picked up the paddle. According to Coach Thor, it has over the years become one of the premier places to practice in Minnesota. The team practices by participating in local tournaments, including a weekly money tournament in Minneapolis, and by playing and drilling with teammates. The players'

schedules are chock-full mainly of non-collegiate tournaments. Referring to the NCTTA National Championships, Coach Thor said “this is kind of another stop on the tournament calendar.”

That isn't to say the championships weren't a heavy priority for the team, who completed their astonishing season as the 4th-ranked college team in the nation, all in each player's first season with the NCTTA. The Golden Gophers had to fight through teams as tough as the Ohio Division's top-ranked University of Michigan to make it to the semifinals. They were earlier crowned Minnesota Division Champions.

“Our team is as much an incarnation of table tennis in Minnesota as a whole, as it is of the University of Minnesota itself,” Coach Thor said.