

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.