

“Table Tennis”

My first proper defeat in ping-pong was by a Turkish exchange student, who came to my high school during sophomore year. We played a total of three games, and although I won one of the three, there was no question in either of our minds that this was a result of statistics rather than skill. His placement of the ball was precise and this precision was rehearsed; I left seeing very clearly the difference between ping pong as a hobby and as sport.

It was within the starting week of my arrival at CERN that I first joined a couple of fellow UM REUers, Tom and Lauren, at the tables (I learned very quickly that the correct term here is "table tennis"). There was no especially serious competition at this stage, and the incentive for playing was entirely social. One memorable evening was spent taking the game to the far extremes of athleticism, playing with four balls at once; on this occasion as for many to come, I found that friendships forged at the table tended to last. The British, German, and South African students who I met on this occasion have remained close companions ever since, even making up the majority of my WebFest team, all the way up to this week's tearful goodbyes.

This is not to say that a fiercer competitive atmosphere made the table an any less socially-formative environment. I believe it was in mid-July that the CERN Table Tennis Tournament was announced, unfortunately for the weekend after the end of my stay. The increase in regular attendees was immediately palpable, and a great many experienced challengers appeared for the first time. Within a week, I had expanded my circle of regular opponents to include summer students from Bosnia, Iran, Albania, and China. Although victory was now much less frequent, returns in the form of new tips and tricks were all the greater.

In a setting such as CERN, conversations with my new companions of course could not be limited to table tennis, even if this was the vertex about which our meetings revolved. In any physics-related discussion, everyone brought some unique perspective. I distinctly remember Ilirjan, an Albanian master's student, offering me his notebooks to assist with my GRE studying. I had never seen such exquisitely thorough derivations, with every principle in every undergraduate physics course proven from first principles, and no step left unaccounted for. It doesn't seem possible to objectively compare whether I learned more from this

organizational style or from his supercharged forehand. I can at least say that I contributed some guidance in Python algorithms in return.

Perhaps just as CERN is the center of collaboration for explorers of fundamental physics the world over, the table tennis community of R1 was my center of collaboration this summer. I sincerely hope that I will manage to maintain all these contacts after my departure, but even if this is not to be, I know that the crosscultural appreciation I have gained will always stay with me. When someday I return to CERN again, perhaps I will some new tricks of my own to bring to the table.