

PUTTING IT ALL ON THE TABLE

A former table tennis champ can finally reveal her dirty little secret **BY DAHLIA KURTZ** PHOTOGRAPH BY FINN O'HARA

I was ashamed by it. In fact, for most of my life I did my best to hide it. But things have changed, and I'm finally ready to come out of the basement. I am (deep breath) a former table tennis champion.

The average person plays Ping-Pong, but growing up in Winnipeg, I played table tennis—really well. Coached by my dad and inspired by my older brother—who was also a top-ranked player—I rose to the top of my game between the ages of 12 and 17. Yet, being ranked No. 1 in Canada among all high-school aged girls didn't exactly score me any points with my classmates. Neither did being dubbed “Killer Kurtz” by the media.

But that's all in the past. Today, being a table tennis champ is no longer synonymous with being a loser. That's because the lifestyles of the rich and famous now commonly include the sport that shaped my youth. 50 Cent is hosting table tennis parties; Barack Obama and David Cameron teamed up at the table earlier this year. Meanwhile, Oscar winner Susan Sarandon has taken things a step further. SPiN, her celebrity Ping-Pong hotspot that launched in New York, has recently spun its way into several cities, including Toronto.

In their mind's eye, most people picture pong-playing men who seem stuck in the '70s, sporting short shorts. But thanks to miniskirts and movie stars, table tennis is being pulled into the 21st century faster than a flat hit travelling 110 km/h across less than three metres.

And it brings back a lot of memories. Before I was even a tween, I travelled the country and later the world: from Banff to New York to Tel Aviv—a kid with a view.

I trained with Olympians, received numerous government grants and scholarships for university. I was even asked for an autograph and made sure to sign my name as the American gymnast—Kerri Strug—who the fan thought I was.

Standing five feet tall has its perks. I'm not short; I'm concentrated. So, power and speed have less distance to travel, but to have those qualities I had to work harder. Athleticism and agility are things you don't laugh at when it comes to other sports. But my classmates guffawed when I won the under-12s at the North American Open in 1988. Just like blocking hits to my backhand, blocking backhanded compliments became part of my training.

What started like a part-time job—I put in about about 15 hours a week—turned into a full-time lifestyle. Drills, strategy, shadow practising. Running, plyometrics, footwork. Try shuttling 10 feet backwards to make a chop, then 10 feet forward to make the kill. It's not just “table” tennis anymore.

At a national training camp in Ottawa, it was fun to start the day running stairs. A few days later, however, that charm was gone. After hours of drills and fitness tests, cool-down was a 10 p.m. jog along the Rideau Canal, at which point not even the night breeze was refreshing. That camp was only a week long, but so were all the others.

Equipment also played a role. Glued to my one-of-a-kind, blazing fast racket were two sheets of rubber. My backhand had a normal variety of “smooth,” my forehand an unconventional “long pimple” surface. The spins were tricky for opponents, and even trickier for me to master. But once I did, I could confuse with a mid-point “twiddle” or flip

of my weapon, changing spins on shots.

All the travel and equipment cost hundreds of dollars or more a month, so sponsors like Shell and Petro-Canada paid what the government didn't. And my forehand smash helped bankroll my higher education, earning more than \$34,000 in scholarship money toward honours degrees from the University of Winnipeg. (Unfortunately, not enough was left to treat the muscle and tissue damage I did to my neck and shoulder, requiring me to cover the physio later in life.)

When winning stopped being fun and losing became my biggest fear, I burned out—and so did my Olympic dreams. I stopped playing table tennis just before turning 17, but it never stopped paying off; that education, discipline, and independence continue to grow into opportunities.

Now, the surge in Ping-Pong's popularity has rekindled in me a desire to play. Sure, I'm not as good as I used to be, but I bet you're still not nearly as good as I am. Though I miss being the best, the game is more fun now than when I'd wear my hair in pigtails to psych out the brawny men I'd beat at clubs and tourneys.

And I'm not the only one enjoying myself.

About two million Canadians played Ping-Pong last year, and it was the fourth-most watched event at the Beijing Games in 2008. Outside of North America, the game has always been a respected and popular arena sport. And now, albeit thanks to some celebrity-generated hype, it's nice to finally see my sport gaining some positive attention. All of which has helped me finally come to terms with the fact that I am and will forever be—head high—a table tennis champion. **SN**

SPEED SHOTS

Other balls (and pucks) travel faster, but have farther to go than in Ping-Pong. Here are some of the fastest speeds recorded.

