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A new image for foosball

Tourney unites fans, raises funds

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For most people, foosball is the soccerlike table game they may have tried a few times in the student lounge at college or the basement of the neighborhood kid who had everything.

Then there are guys like Bruce Nardoci, aka The Legend, who sat on a stool Saturday sizing up the competition in the game room of Fat Daddy's restaurant on Glenwood Avenue, site of this year's North Carolina Open Foosball Championships.

Nardoci was serious about foosball even before he entered N.C. State University in 1974. He remained so serious about the game while there that he spent six years earning an engineering degree instead of the usual four.

"Growing up in Asheboro, there was nothing else to do but go to the bowling alley, where there was a foosball table," he said.

Now a nuclear engineer living in Charlotte, Nardoci has collected trophies from playing around the world. Most weekends, he is in a tournament somewhere. So on Saturday, he joined about 65 other foosball fanatics at the North Carolina Open in Raleigh.

They played for prizes ranging from \$20 to \$400, but most of the proceeds went to the Jimmy V Foundation for Cancer Research. An initial contribution of \$2,100 was expected to grow by the end of the tournament.

"It takes finesse and speed," said Robbie Patterson, who came from Staunton, Va., for the event.

All afternoon and late into the night, the contestants faced each other across eight French-style Bonzini tables, deftly moving small cork balls back and forth for the score. Many were serious enough to bring their own handles, swapping black plastic for custom grips. Others wore golf or batting gloves.

"The difference between a good player and a great player is the five-bar," said H.H. Hancock, president of Powerkick, a Raleigh foosball club that helped support the event.

The five-bar is the mid-field row of five players, the highest number that a player controls in a single hand.

Hancock, 36, didn't start playing until he was a graduate student in specialty dentistry at UNC-Chapel Hill. Now he figures he practices about 30 minutes a day on his own table at home, with his girlfriend sometimes playing defense.

"It's a professional hobby," Hancock said. "There's a commitment. There's a passion. There's a desire to be better."

Nikki Takei, 37, one of few female competitors at the tournament, picked up the game a half dozen years ago after playing as a student at Penn State University.

The Raleigh resident and kitchen designer is now a regular. So far this year, she has been to tournaments in Kentucky, Washington, D.C., and Michigan.

"I love the social aspect of it," said Takei, a Powerkick member. "It's about the friends you make."

Andy Petesch, 36, a recent law school graduate from the University of Richmond, said he likes the competition.

"It's amazing to see the amount of control and expertise," he said.

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