

Staying on the ball

By: **JODI SPIEGEL ARTHUR** (Wed, May/03/2006)

A smoke-filled bar, beer, soda, food and the sound of balls aimed by plastic soccer players at the goals of two foosball tables might appear to be the makings of a night of revelry for college students.

But the players taking turns maneuvering the men on metal rods stationed above table soccer fields in Warminster are adults well beyond their teens and early 20s.

And to them, foosball is more than just a game. It's a competitive sport.

"You get addicted to it. You want a challenge. You want (to play) people who are better than you," Dave Stremme of Hatboro said.

The 42-year-old project engineer was playing with 17 other men and one woman who are part of a group of semi-professionals and amateurs that meet at Walsh's Tavern every Monday night for a foosball tournament that pays out weekly prize money. On Monday, eight players shared \$190, but the weekly prizes vary, depending on the number of players.

The competition will be far more intense and the stakes higher during a much bigger tournament this weekend when players from around the region and maybe even across the country pair up for a shot at \$5,000 in prize money.

"These guys are so good, it's like playing with a professional athlete," said David Myers, a 43-year-old Newtown resident. "I'll see shots I've never seen before. It's just like being with Michael Jordan at basketball."

The Pennsylvania States tournament at Walsh's Tavern begins at 8 p.m. Friday and continues at 11 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday. There are events for both amateurs and professionals.

Tournament director Joe Fisher of Warminster, a 44-year-old stay-at-home dad and part-time UPS worker, said he rented 10 new tables for the state contest — top-ranked players like them clean and new because they perform better — and he is hoping for 75 to 100 contestants.

"I can't wait for this weekend. It's going to be fun," he said. "There's a guy who can dribble the ball ... and shoot it into the air at the opposite goal. It's called an aerial. They do stuff you can't imagine."

Top-ranked player Billy Pappas, a 21-year-old who won his first foosball title at age 12, is reported to be one of the professionals who may compete in the state tournament. Pappas is currently competing in Europe.

"He's full time. He plays foosball. That's it. That's his career. He's one of the top two in the world," said Jeff Persch of Ardmore, a 35-year-old software engineer who's a regular at Walsh's on Monday nights.

Thirty-year-old Susie Kovaleski of Hatfield, one of two women who participate in the weekly tournaments, knows how tough it is to play against Pappas. The Starbucks manager and graduate school student reached the finals in a tournament in Maryland in 2003 but lost to Pappas.

Kovaleski said she learned to play foosball while growing up near Wilkes-Barre.

"When I moved down this way, I found the Phillyfoos Web site, and I've been with these guys ever since," she said about the tournaments listed on www.phillyfoos.com. The site links to another Web site where players are ranked by the U.S. Table Soccer Association.

Kovaleski is one of the younger players in the Monday night group that ranges in age from about 28 to 55 and draws devoted players from as far away as Reading and Allentown.

One of those players, Chris Campbell of Perkasië, has been playing foosball since he was 12 or 13.

"It keeps your mind active," he said. "As hobbies go, it's not really expensive."

George Ferzetti of Hatboro said he began playing a year and a half ago when he needed a new hobby after a crash caused serious damage to his motorcycle.

"I needed ... something to fill the void," the 34-year-old owner of a pest control company said. "It's kind of a weird hobby."

Ferzetti likened foosball competition to a chess match and said it is 90 percent mental.

Stremme, one of two semi-professionals in the Monday night group, said that's especially true when playing a team of equal skill.

"It becomes a chess match," he said. "It's a matter of outwitting, outthinking."

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