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## Once spurned for video games, foosball is alive and kicking

**By J.J. Jensen**

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Perhaps you're tops at your tavern. Maybe you're lord of the dorm or boss of the break room.

If that's the case, are you — apologies to Hank Williams Jr. — ready for some foosball?

Some serious table-soccer action usually isn't too hard to find around the region. Take for instance Dante's Steak & Grog's Friday-night tourneys in the University District.

Contestants there are pretty passionate about their foos, judging by the play on a recent Friday night.

With more than \$100 in prize money on the line, players and patrons ringed the bar's three foosball tables like a crowd gathering 'round a schoolyard fight.

Action was fast and furious. Players, making lightning-quick passes and shots, gripped and slid the rods like line cooks with frying pans during a Saturday-morning rush. Comments of "ooh," "ahh," and "nice shot" came from onlookers.

"These guys are nuts," said Kyle Fletcher, 23, a newcomer to the Seattle foosball scene who once ran



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Steph Ohashi, 34, and her partner Chad Kinner, 36, are members of the Seattle Foosball League



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

A ball is dropped into play during a game at an area club.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Ohashi, a regional champion from Woodinville, admits she is addicted to

the table at his Willamette University fraternity. But he foosball.  
and his roommate have been getting a smackdown at  
Dante's.

**Foos you can use**

**Brush up on foosball lingo so you can talk like a foos-shark. These are from [foosball.com](#).**

**Camping out:** The defense predicts and arrives at a hole much sooner than the offense shoots at it — usually even before the shot begins.

**Foos-shark:** Someone you should've looked up in the United States Table Soccer Association rankings book before putting money on the table, even though that person looked drunk.

**Goalie delight:** Every time the goalie scores, the next ball is dropped as a reward into play in their defensive zone.

**Joe:** A shot that goes into the goal off a deflection from the defending team.

**Kibitzing:** Coaching from the sideline.

**Lemming:** When the ball rolls slowly but surely into the goal, despite all the defender's best efforts.

**Saturday Night Foosball:** A flamboyant style of play intended to show off the talents of the players for an audience.

"I thought we'd be OK because we play quite a bit, but these guys are seasoned."

While the casual player can be competitive in local leagues and small tournaments — players are assigned handicaps based on skill levels — they can expect to get their comeuppance at tournaments sanctioned by foosball's governing bodies, the North American Table Soccer Association and the Valley International Foosball Association.

"The recreational player will get destroyed (at larger tournaments)," said Bothell's Rich Fosner, 42, a nationally ranked player who frequents Dante's. "Their egos shrink really quick."

If you want to hang with the big-time foos players you've got to practice and take your licks, said Steph Ohashi, 34, a regional champion from Woodinville, who along with Lynnwood's Chad Kinner, 36, another regional champ, own about 40 tables at bars from Lynnwood to Puyallup and organize several leagues.

Ohashi said her foosball addiction delayed her graduation from Western Washington University by two years. On most nights, rather than hitting the books, she was playing foos at Bellingham's Gus & Naps Tavern or in tournaments in Mount Vernon or Concrete.

"When I moved to Seattle, thinking I was all that, I started playing in weekly tournaments," she said. "It was a reality check."

While some may remember tables that featured ramped corners and one-man goalie rods, games today are usually played on

Tornado tables, the industry standard for about 20 years, which feature a completely flat surface and three-man goalie rod.

Typically, local league nights feature three- or four-person teams that play a combination of games: doubles, singles, switching positions after goals, playing a match where the ball isn't allowed to stop moving. Sometimes there's a "beer round," where the losers of a three-on-three or four-on-four game have to buy the next pitcher of suds.

Games go to five. The best three of five games wins the match.

Some of the best places and nights to find games or join a league, Ohashi said, include Kent's Moonraker Pub & Eatery on Mondays, Dante's on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Toby Magee's Pub & Eatery in Everett on Sundays. Each location usually has a dozen or so players.

Those numbers, though, are a shadow of what the game used to draw during its heyday in the 1970s, say old-school players. Back then, the Northwest was a foosball hotbed.

According to Cheney's Kathy Brainard, 52, a winner of numerous national tournaments and co-author of the 1980 book "The Complete Book of Foosball," one of the first big-money table soccer tournaments (\$1,500) was organized by businessman Lee Peppard at his tavern in Missoula, Mont.

The next year, at a \$5,000 tournament, Peppard introduced his own table, named "Tournament Soccer," which served as the industry standard through the decade.

Peppard moved his headquarters to Seattle and started the first pro foosball tour, the Tournament Soccer Quarter Million Dollar Tour. During the next few years, the tour was awarding upward of \$1 million in prize money, and featured tournaments with Porsches and Corvettes as top prizes.

"Foosball was something new and interesting and everybody wanted to play," said Seattle's Rocky Willson, 49, a regional champ and longtime table vendor.

During the late '70s at Goldie's, on North 45th Street in Wallingford, he recalled, there were about 13 foosball tables, most occupied nightly. But by the early 1980s, Willson said, the tour had been overpromoted and bar patrons were more interested in a new fad: video games such as Space Invaders, Pacman, Centipede and Galaga. Foosball went on life support.

Interest finally peaked again, Brainard said, in the mid 1990s. Baby boomers wanted foos tables for their rec rooms, dot-commers liked having it in their break rooms and kids saw cast members on "Friends" playing it in their living room.

Some still find it kind of silly.

On a recent night at Goldie's, where there's now just one table, David Torvik, 25, played against his roommate. "God gave me a gift. I foos well," he gloated.

"I just like to go to bars and play for fun and meet people," he said. "I wouldn't want to play in a league where it's supercompetitive."

Meanwhile, some extremists would like to see table soccer, which was believed to be first patented in England in the 1890s and introduced to Americans during World War II, be in the Olympics. Table tennis, after all, made the cut.

Other foos fanatics are just happy it's still on society's radar.

"It's become a part of the fabric of the American lifestyle," said Willson.

"Almost everyone's played some foos in their life. It's not a fad and it's not a flash in the pan. People are playing it because they enjoy it."

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