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By Misha Maruma

Table Tennis; A Chinese passion

For as long as most of us can remember, China has topped the medal tables at Olympic table tennis; total dominance by anyone's standards. However, it has not always been this way. Originally a Victorian sport called "whif whaf" or "flim flam", the sport developed during the early twentieth century when the racket was introduced instead of using a cigar box lid.

Before the 1950s, Europeans held charge over the sport. When the International Table Tennis Federation recognised Mao's Communist government over the exiled nationalists in Taiwan, Mao took the opportunity to invest money into the sport and made it the unofficial national sport of China. By 1959 China had its first world Champion.

The association of China with ping pong was further enhanced in 1971 with so-called ping pong diplomacy; the first signs of détente between America and China since Mao's communists officially held power. The US table tennis team was invited to China and ping pong was further cemented in the consciousness of foreigners as a symbol of communist China.

Is this perception of ping pong as the national sport of China beginning to change? Television audiences in China have slowly fallen since the Beijing Olympics in 2008 with particularly low figures during the London Olympics in 2012. With this in mind I went along to a club in Xijiekou to see what the facilities are like to find out how popular table tennis remains in Nanjing.

On my way I wonder how many foreigners will be there. The answer to that question is none; it

turns out there are only four or five foreign members. To join any of the teams at the club a certain level of skill is required. This is assessed by the members at the club.

There is no doubt that the Chinese take ping pong seriously. To keep the interest high there are competitions between the teams every six months. There is a ranking system and movement between the groups as teams improve. If you want to play without the pressure of competition then membership is available in different categories. There is a monthly membership card and also an



annual membership. This club's opening hours are fairly typical of those citywide at 9am to 10pm; flexibility to play when you want.

The club has a very friendly atmosphere. There are kids as young as 10 being taught the basics and learning techniques such as body position. Bear in mind that the club caters for a Chinese crowd.

If anything playing table tennis is a great opportunity to meet some local Nanjingers and practise Chinese as well as to learn the game itself.

As I left the club I saw a tall woman with long black hair smashing excellent forehands down the table while, in typical Chinese fashion, dressed in a long black

cocktail dress and high-heeled shoes. This suggested to me that ping pong has not lost its popularity but in a more globalised world does need to compete with other popular sports. For me the woman in the black dress shows that table tennis will always play a part in Chinese culture and will always have its place as China's unofficial national sport. **NU**

Brazilian Jiu jitsu; The Gentle Art

It is two years since Fred Greenall set up Frontier Asia Brazilian Jiu Jitsu in Nanjing in August 2011. Since then the club has gone on to be a resounding success. Having moved from Zhujiang Lu in 2011 to Zhuangfuyuan today via the Olympic stadium the club now has in excess of 30 members, up from an initial ten, who compete in various competitions in China.

Fred, from the UK, is a former British champion and has been involved in the sport for six years. He is also a Chinese Champion having lead his club to success winning the team prize at the China Open in 2012. Indeed the club produced China Champions in the 2013 China Open held in Shanghai in July meaning they are one of the most successful Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) academies in China.

From its origins in Jiu Jitsu, a Japanese martial art consisting

of grappling and striking moves to counter an opponent, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu comes from the Judo school of grappling and ground fighting. Seen as a self-defence system BJJ promotes the concept that a smaller, weaker person can compete with a bigger, stronger opponent by taking the fight to the ground; the idea being to use leverage and technique to apply joint-locks and chokeholds to defeat the other person.

Because of the self defensive nature of the sport; a young woman, for example, could use the techniques learnt to outmanoeuvre a bigger aggressor, it has been dubbed "the gentle art". There is a preference to using skill over strength, while participants can also reduce anger and stress. BJJ promotes the fundamental idea of no striking, biting and punching; gentlemen's rules if you like.

Although run by foreigners the club has a number of Chinese



members and around five female participants. In fact the only woman member of the club, Megan, competed at the recent China Open. Joe, one of the trainers at the club, hails from the US but speaks fluent Chinese meaning the club really is all inclusive.

There are long term and short term memberships available. Some specialist equipment is needed but this can be bought through the club. If you are a member you can also use the gym facilities in your own time. If you do join the club expect to see me down there, attempting a shot at the gentle art.

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