

Appleby grad ensures table tennis is served

Western only university in Canada with varsity table tennis team

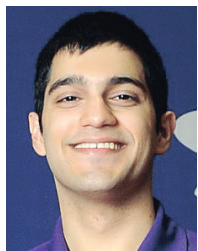
by Jon Kuiperij
Beaver Sports Editor

As he fought to have his university recognize table tennis as a varsity sport, Cyrus Aga was having flashbacks.

Growing up in the southwestern Asia country of United Arab Emirates, Aga was ignored by his elementary school classmates when he tried to jump into table tennis games at recess.

"Kids wouldn't let me play because I wasn't very good," Aga recalls.

A decade later, Aga was being shunned again when it came to the game he loved. Sure, he'd made the Western University table tennis team as a freshman, but that didn't mean much. The club had two old tables that, in Aga's words, were "falling apart." And despite holding try-outs, the only games the team played were in a tournament at the end of the season.



Cyrus Aga

Aga wanted more. He repeatedly lobbied the school's athletic department for recognition and support. The Mustangs, according to Aga, weren't buying in.

"It wasn't so much annoyance as innocent ignorance," the 22-year-old Aga, who moved to Oakville in 2002, says of the response — or lack of response — he received from the university as recently as three years ago. (Attempts to get comment from Western officials were unsuccessful.)

"They didn't know table tennis was a sport and that the passion was there. A lot of it was not responding to my emails or remaining with the status quo," he adds.

"Things changed when they actually went to see games."

Program quickly earned recognition

Today, Western is the home of the only university varsity table tennis team in the country.

The Mustangs, 148th out of 150 at the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association championships in 2010, were eighth the following season. In 2011, the NCTTA gave Western the most improved team award — an accolade that went to Florida State University the previous year. This past season, Aga was named the association's coach of the year after Western's women's and co-ed teams each finished in the top 10.

It's apparently all due to Aga's insistence that table tennis — the national sport of China, where it's known as ping pong — deserved similar varsity status as football, basketball, volleyball, hockey and other mainstream sports.

Western adopted table tennis into its varsity program in 2010, just before Aga entered the third year of his business program. Aga says the school gave the club gym space, provided funding for tables and allowed the team to advertise on the Mustangs' website.

Shortly after that, two former Canadian national team players joined the squad, as did players from China and Sin-



Oakville resident Cyrus Aga, pictured in action at My Table Tennis Club in Mississauga, is credited as the driving force behind table tennis becoming a varsity sport at Western University. | photo by Eric Riehl - Oakville Beaver - @Halton_Photos

gapore.

"We blew up," Aga says. "We entered our first divisional tournament and came third. Then at the end of the year, we placed eighth (at the NCTTA championships). At that point, everyone started taking Western seriously, and the Mustangs took us seriously. It just got better and better from there."

Last season, 90 players tried out for seven spots on the team, which was sponsored by Under Armour and inked a partnership with DHS Table Tennis Company. The squad was anchored by ex-Chinese high school captain Rongge Zhang, former German national championship competitor Celina Kacperski and one-time Manitoba provincial teamer Lucy Liu.

"Rather than me reaching out to students, it was people emailing me to join the team," Aga says. "We had athletes from Germany, China, Singapore, Pakistan, emailing me in August before even getting admission, asking about our team."

Plans to remain involved with NCTTA

Having now completed his business studies at Western, Aga is moving on. He won't remain involved in the Mustangs' table tennis program, confident that he is leaving it in

good hands.

"My work with the Western team is done," the former Appleby College student says.

But that doesn't mean Aga has lost his passion for the sport. He couldn't possibly, considering what table tennis has done for him.

"It wasn't much, but we had a tournament at the very end of (elementary) school, and I won," recalls Aga, who had received private lessons in Pakistan the previous summer, unbeknownst to any of his schoolmates. "I just came out of nowhere. Nobody had expected me to amount to anything."

"It was the first time I felt self confident about anything. I learned that if I worked hard at something and trained at it diligently, I could accomplish something. It was the beginning of an intrinsic drive I think would lead me to where I am today."

Aga hopes to serve in some capacity with the NCTTA, either as a director or volunteer, and also help other Canadian universities found table tennis varsity programs of their own.

— Jon Kuiperij can be followed on Twitter @Beaversports

Iroquois Ridge student wins GHAC tennis singles gold

Iroquois Ridge high school student Matthew Vivolo defeated White Oaks' Cameron Siou in an all-Oakville final to win the Golden Horseshoe Athletic Conference high school boys' singles tennis title last week in Burlington.

Vivolo won the final set 5-1. Both boys will represent GHAC at the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations championships June 3-5 at Toronto's Rexall Centre.

Several other Oakville residents also qualified for OFSAA

with top-two finishes at GHAC. Abbey Park's Colin Nowers and Sydney Cook won the high school mixed doubles title, Jane Coombs and Casey Lambert of Oakville Trafalgar claimed the open girls' doubles crown, OT's Mark Jensen and Spencer Grant were second in open boys' doubles, Abbey Park's Martin Hong was second in open boys' singles, and White Oaks' Tara Moulson earned silver in high school girls' singles.