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Taking Hold in Silicon Valley, a Ping-Pong Boom

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

MILPITAS, Calif. — Young people who were serious about table tennis used to have to make the trip to Beijing, Stockholm or Moscow to train with world-class coaches.

Now they go no farther than this Silicon Valley suburb.

"I'm trying to become one of the greatest players in the nation," Srivatsav Tangirala, 14, said matter-of-factly between drills at the huge new table tennis facility here. He and three dozen players, some as young as 5, sprinted sideways along the edge of the tables, 45 times in a row, perfecting their footwork.

"Lean forward, lean, lean, lean, lean!" their coach implored.

This is the largest training program for youths in the country, run by the India Community Center in an area that is 60 percent Asian. Here, Ping-Pong parents who grew up with the sport in Sichuan Province or Hyderabad are the new soccer moms and Little League dads.

One of 12 table tennis clubs in the area, up from 5 clubs in 1990, the India Community Center's Ping-Pong facility was started last year with seed money from two Indian entrepreneurs and has already become an influential hatchery for Olympic hopefuls, most of whom banter in Hindi or Mandarin at home.

Ariel Hsing, 14, the top-ranked United States junior, from San Jose, Calif., and Lily Zhang, 13



HEIDI SCHUMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ariel Hsing looking at articles about her table tennis prowess.

and ranked No. 2, from Palo Alto, Calif., are a fearsome twosome, with matching teal braces, bulging calf muscles and a dream of playing in the 2012 Olympics. Ariel cradles the ball in her palm like a baby chick — before she lets go and smashes it.

They and over 100 other teenagers, many the daughters and sons of technology professionals, are being coached by talent from around the world: Gaolin Tang from Sichuan Province; Stellan Bengtsson, the Swedish champion; and Rajul Sheth, the center's executive director, a veteran of the Indian national team.

In the past, top players grew up in China and became Ameri-

can citizens in order to play for the United States Olympic team. Today, 80 percent of players age 14 and younger are Asian-Americans, according to USA Table Tennis, the sport's national governing body.

"Hyphenated kids who are born and raised here and have a foot in both worlds are the ones taking the lead," said David Del Vecchio, a board member of the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association.

In Milpitas, the hollow knocking sounds of Ping-Pong balls reverberate off walls lined with triumphal newspaper clippings in The Sing Tao Daily and The India

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