



## Introducing Table Tennis

by Tony Brooks,  
*Secretary-General of The  
International Table Tennis Federation*



Table tennis is now a sport on the Olympic programme and will participate in the Olympic Games in 1988, having for some years been recognised by the IOC and included in many Regional Games. These notes describe its history and the development of its international federation.

Table tennis as a pastime, of course, needs no introduction ; there can be few people who have not at some time in their lives lightly hit a celluloid ball over a net on a table. But the gulf between that game and the sport as it is practised by the most skilled of its thirty million competitive players is as wide as that between jogging for fun and running in Olympic finals.

Table tennis at national and international level is as rigorous as any sport in its demands for the highest degree of physical fitness and mental concentration, attained only by arduous training to develop natural skill. Fred Perry, World Men's Singles Table Tennis Champion in 1928-29, later achieved even greater fame at Wimbledon ; perhaps it would not be true to say that he moved to the larger court when his play became too slow for the table, but it is certainly true that no sport requires faster reactions and more delicate muscular co-ordination than table tennis.

Like many other sports, however, table tennis began as a mild social diversion. Descending, along with lawn tennis and badminton, from the ancient medieval game of tennis, it was popular in England in the second half of the nineteenth century under its present name and various trade names such as Gossima and Whiff-whaff. After the name Ping-pong (an imitation of the sound made by the ball striking the table and the vellum bats that were then used) was introduced, the game became a fashionable craze. There are many contemporary references to it and illustrations of it being played, usually in domestic surroundings.

The game was popular in Central Europe in 1905-1910, and even before this a modified version had been introduced to Japan, whence it later spread to China and Korea.

After a period when it had dropped out of favour in Europe, the game was revived in England and Wales in the early twenties. By that time 'Ping-pong' had been registered as a trademark, so the earlier name of table tennis was re-introduced. National Associations were formed and standardisation of the rules began.

Following discussions in Berlin in January 1926, the International Table Tennis Federation held its first meeting and Championships in London in December of that year, the participants including players from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, India, Sweden and Wales.

The next World Championships were held in Stockholm in 1928, and then annually until 1939, by which time twenty-eight Associations were affiliated to the ITTF. From 1947, the Championships were again held annually until 1957, and have been biennial ever since; the 37th are due to take place in Tokyo in 1983. These Championships are nowadays among the largest single-sport events in the world, usually involving about five hundred players from more than sixty countries, with two team and five individual events being played on twenty tables over a period of twelve days. Continental Federations also hold biennial Championships, often with participants from thirty or more countries. Open International Championships are organised annually or biennially by all of the larger Associations.

The game itself has not changed in essence since its earliest days, though it is faster, more subtle and more demanding than it was even only twenty years ago. A constant pre-

occupation of the ITTF has always been to ensure that it remains a contest of human skills and that technological developments which add a new factor to the game do not give too great or too permanent an advantage to the players who have the first opportunity of making use of them. Thus, equipment specifications-such as those relating to the surface of the racket-are carefully laid down, rigorously enforced, and changed only after much consideration.

Other changes-a lowering of the net, a rule to avoid protracted games between defensive players, and rules preventing excessive advantage being gained by the server-were introduced in the thirties and other minor ones are made from time to time. Some of them are aimed not only at retaining the excitement of table tennis for the player, but also at making sure that it remains interesting for the spectator.

From 1935, no distinction was made between amateur table tennis players and others, and as far as its own competitions are concerned the sport remains 'open', both the amateur majority and a small professional element being under the control of the ITTF through its affiliated Associations. However, the ITTF's rules were amended in 1977 in accordance with Article 26 of the Olympic Charter so that eligibility requirements for the Olympic Games could be properly complied with. There will therefore be no difficulty in ensuring that the ITTF's conditions for their amateur players will be acceptable to the IOC when the time comes.

Several factors have contributed towards the steady rise in membership of the ITTF and its firm establishment as the governing body of the sport. First, table tennis has become truly popular, in all senses of the word, in every Part of the world. Second, the ITTF's Constitution was framed from the earliest days in a way which reduced the impact of some of the problems besetting international sport. For example, any form of racial discrimination by member Associations was banned from 1934, and its practice was made a disqualification for membership in a rule passed in 1947, long before the word 'apartheid' was known throughout the world and before any other major sports organisation had made such a dear declaration. It is perhaps also significant that the ITTF has been guided throughout its history by only two Presidents-the Hon. Ivor Montagu (England) from



its foundation until 1967, and Roy Evans (Wales) since then.

Today, the ITTF has over 120 Associations affiliated to it. More than eighty of them send delegates to its Biennial General Meetings where the major decisions are taken, and basic management is carried on by an elected Council of thirty-three members from twenty-nine countries, advised by specialist Committees and Commissions. Administration is handled by a permanent Secretariat in England where a small professional staff is employed.

The International Table Tennis Federation is confident that its organisation and the qualities of the sport it serves will amply justify its inclusion in the programme of the Games of the XXIVth Olympiad. Although barely more than one in a million of its enthusiasts all over the world will actually participate in the Games, the remainder will be with them in spirit.

*T.B.*

