



putting a good
SPIN
on retirement

Joe Shumaker
is smashing success
at table tennis

BY GREG SEITER
PHOTOS BY MARK FREELAND

In some ways, Franklin resident Joe Shumaker is a typical 67-year-old. The Southport High School graduate enjoys spending time with his wife and friends, volunteers through his church and community and strives to remain physically fit. However, there's one thing in particular that differentiates Shumaker from most others his age: He is an elite-level table tennis player.

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► JOE SHUMAKER

Shumaker, who spent 36 years at Eli Lilly and Co., took up the game when he was 30 as a member of his employer's table tennis club. "Back then, each club had its own budget, and we traveled around to participate in different tournaments," he said. "I participated in clinics too and got to be fairly good."

He was a table tennis enthusiast for approximately 15 years but decided to quit the sport while in his early 40s. "I started bowling and had some other interests, but it didn't take long for me to realize that I really missed the game and especially the camaraderie," he said. "So I started playing again when I retired from Lilly."

Shumaker soon became a frequent visitor at the Table Tennis Club of Indianapolis and developed a friendship with the facility's owners, Robert and Josie Clyde.

"When I first retired, I trained a lot with the owners' son, Stephen," Shumaker said. "We trained approximately four days per week."

Interestingly enough, Josie Clyde attributes some of her youngest son's success in the sport to Shumaker.

"Stephen has been state men's champion three times, and Joe was definitely a part of his first one," Clyde said. "To us and our boys, he's like a pseudo grandpa."



Joe Shumaker and Peggy Sansone play at the Table Tennis Club of Indianapolis.

Yet Shumaker certainly doesn't play table tennis as a stereotypical grandfather might.

"Years ago, I won the state doubles title with a 13-year-old kid who had spent time training in China," he recalls. "He was fourth in the country at one point, but I believe he's a lawyer in Phoenix now."

For those serious about competitive table tennis, overseas training sessions, which might last a couple of months according to Shumaker, seem to be almost a necessity. In fact, even Clyde's son trained in Germany at one time.

"If you want to be very good, you almost have to train overseas," Shumaker said. "China is No. 1 in the world. It's their top sport. But Germany, Sweden, South Korea and Japan are also strong. Table tennis has never really become a big sport in the U.S. We just can't compete at that level."

However, that's not to say the game isn't popular in America. In fact, the Table Tennis Club of Indianapolis has seen its fair share of well-known visi-

tors over the years, including former Indiana Fever Coach Lin Dunn and former Indiana University basketball player Evan Gordon.

"Coach Dunn just liked to play for fun, but Gordon is one of the club's best players when he's here," Shumaker said. "Obviously, he's very athletic, but he's also a great kid. I think he's playing basketball in China now, but he's also training in table tennis."

"He hasn't won our state tournament yet, but if he comes back this year, I'm sure he'll probably win it."

Shumaker is also quick to point out that table tennis differs from traditional pingpong in a couple of specific ways.

"Pingpong is more so what is played at home in a basement," he said. "The ball isn't spun at all. In fact, you play with rackets that don't allow for a spin to be put on the ball."

Table tennis, on the other hand, is played with rackets specifically designed to allow for heavy ball spin, thanks to varying types of interchangeable rubber sheets on the face of each one. Lightweight graphite rackets are also available to aid in the



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Shumaker plays with Jerry Routtas.



Shumaker and Sansone team up for a doubles match.

ball-spinning process.

“Table tennis is played mostly away from the table,” he added. “You get a major workout.”

Shumaker, who usually trains at the Table Tennis Club of Indianapolis three days each week, reportedly played an important role in helping the facility establish programming spe-

cifically for older adults.

“It was sort of like in the movie ‘Field of Dreams,’” Clyde said. “He assured us that there are a lot of retirees out there looking for things to do, and he told us that if we would do something for them, they would come.”

“So we started out with a senior program for a couple of hours one

morning each week, and it grew. Joe managed that program for a while until his wife retired and he decided to spend more time with her.”

Today, while continuing to play the game for fun and physical fitness, Shumaker also trains to participate in competitions such as the Indiana State Games, which

serve as a qualifying event for the National Senior Games and the World Veteran Championships.

The table tennis competition during this year’s Indiana State Games will take place between May 17 and 25 at the University of Evansville, while the National Senior Games are scheduled for 2019 in New Mexico.

Shumaker also plans to participate in this summer’s World Veteran Championships June 18 to 24 in Las Vegas. That event is the largest table tennis tournament in existence.

“It’s usually held in Europe and hasn’t been to the U.S. in 30 years,” he said. “There will be 350 tables set up, and it will draw 5,000 players from 80 countries, including four or five former world champions.”

However, while Shumaker is excited to see and compete with many of the best table tennis players across the country and from around the world during the next few months, he seems equally enthused about catching up with old friends and making new ones.

“Nobody else plays in our family, but my wife is very supportive. She goes to all these tournaments with me and sits all those hours, but I think she enjoys the camaraderie almost as much as I do,” he said.

“The game is good for hand-eye coordination, and it certainly helps you stay in shape, but you also get to meet people from all walks of life. In fact, a lot of ministers, Ph.D.s and doctors even play. You just can’t believe how much fun it is until you try it.”

Clyde agrees and praises Shumaker for his competitive skills and ability to connect with others through table tennis.

“Joe plays with a unique grip and excels at the forehand loop and backhand block. He puts a lot of anti-spin on his backhand,” she said. “But beyond that, he’s just an all-around good guy. What stands out to me is Joe’s faith in Jesus Christ, which comes through in his concern for others. He truly cares about other players and people in general.” 