

# A Surreal Ping-Pong Adventure

By Fred Slater

On Wednesday, April 4, [2012], I signed up for the Aaron Beamish Classic at Spin Galactic (<<http://toronto.spingalactic.com/>>).

Now, for those who don't know, "Spin" is a new club in Toronto. It is a strange combination of "night club" and "serious table tennis." The original club is in New York City and was partly financed by Susan Sarandon, who loves ping-pong but is a so-so player. Here is a video: <<http://toronto.spingalactic.com//media.video.php?mediaid=7>>.

In any case, this competition is a small, once-a-month tournament in which a few of the very best players are not allowed to compete. I showed up and [found] they were late getting started. The players were divided into eight groups of approximately seven players. My group was relegated to the far room where the lighting was dim. It contained the "owner of the club," plus two young women in their twenties who had heard about the club and wanted to visit, as well as three young men.

Well, my first match is with the owner, and he is quite a good player. I am quite nervous and struggling with the lighting. I lose in straight games. It turns out that two people advance from each group, and since I win all my other games in this group against rather weak players I am one of the players to advance to the "last 16" knock-out portion of the tournament.

My round of "16 match" is against a young, very athletic player, earring in place. Now we are playing in the main room and the lighting is better (not good, but better). Loud popular music is played continuously in this club, so it is full of ambience. I am feeling good; what have I got to lose? It turns out that my opponent is not well trained at ping-pong but he has great natural ability and determination. I find myself hitting the ball with all my strength, and he is returning it (high) from all over the court. It is difficult to get the ball past him. (Thank goodness I have been exercising recently and my fitness level is increasing.) I sometimes have to smash it 10 times on one point. And now the master of ceremonies, who is a large black man wearing boots whom you would not want to mess with, takes notice of our match. He carries a portable mike. He nicknames me "Silent Fred." My opponent manages to take one game, but I keep hitting away and eventually prevail.

Now I am in the quarter-finals. My opponent is "Sacha," a tall, lanky young man who knows how to play and to whom I have lost on a previous occasion. We are fairly evenly matched, but with the score 6-4 for him I hit a long, deep drive that he chases. Suddenly he stops and clenches his shoulder, an excruciating grimace on his face. He calls the MC, who apparently (who would have guessed?) is a doctor in real life. The doctor calls upon another man (who has unknown medical skills), and the three of them go into a washroom where they relocate the shoulder. While this is going on (about six or seven minutes) I retreat to a bench and drink water. When my opponent returns, he wants to continue playing! Huh? Is this wise? In any case, he can't play as well after this event, and I beat him.

Now I am in the semi-final. The MC is excited about our game. My opponent is nicknamed "The Terminator" and is muscular with a bald head. Anyone making it this far is a good player. He comments that I must be the only other player near his age (55). I

agree with him. The match is on, with the MC following and promoting it. For some strange reason, my hits go in and I beat him 2 straight.

The final! Who would have thought it? We are to play on centre court. The MC is to be the referee. They bring score cards in. Everyone in the place gathers round. My opponent is a European named Alex. He is dressed in proper ping-pong attire (shorts, running shoes and a dark shirt). I am wearing my dress pants and street shoes (they get a good grip) and trying to play it cool. What the heck; there's no reason now that I can't win. The final is 3 out of 5. I go out swinging (remember Patrick Brazeau) and win the first game. Alex, however, wins the second.

In the middle of the third game, a very strange thing happens. This attractive blonde (almost a caricature of a sexy woman) dressed in stilettos and a very short skirt and showing cleavage slowly walks between me and the table over to the referee and very publicly kisses him. Then she slowly retraces her steps while the whole room watches her. What could I do but say hello (and watch too)? I am not sure, but I think that this could have been a set-up and part of the show. Anyway, we get back to ping-pong. Alex wins the third game. I drink some water and try to be serious. The crowd is now cheering me on because I am the underdog. Underdog? My opponent can't hit through me and my loop is better than his. I just have to avoid making mistakes. Things go my way and I win the fourth game.

Now to the final and deciding game. I ask the referee if we are to switch ends mid-game. (We should.) I start off badly and am losing 5-1 at the end-change. Things continue to go badly and I am losing 10-4. Alex only needs to win one more point. He is a little nervous and I win both his serves. It's 10-6. The crowd is quiet. I give him my two best serves and he misses them both. It's 10-8. Now he is serving. I win the first point. It's 10-9. Now we are both nervous, but the crowd comes alive. They are cheering me on. When I win the next point, Alex is really angry with himself and swats the ball away in disgust. Deuce, all even. On the next point I chop-serve and loop the return hard but I miss. Alas, it was not to be! Alex wins the next point and the match.

Pictures and prizes! Second prize was \$50 plus a \$50 gift card to Spin plus two wrong-size (M) t-shirts.

What an evening! Someone told me it was the most exciting final they had had.