

Table footballers seek global glory



By Hugh Schofield
In Paris

Eleven men in blue - rather wooden in performance but remarkably good at cartwheels - are this weekend trying to recapture for France the glory it won five years ago at the football world cup in Paris.

Just a few miles from the national sports stadium, the Stade de France, teams from around the globe have once again gathered for a competition that requires intense training, ruthless determination and superb physical fitness.

Well, make that a predilection for going down the pub, club-ability and a strong pair of wrists.

Welcome to the Table Football World Cup, the first ever organised under the newly-created International Table Soccer Federation (ITSF).

Thanks to Sars, the roll-call of international sides is sadly depleted.

China, Canada, Morocco, Argentina and Nigeria have been unable to attend.

Healing a rift

And the British side failed to qualify because the captain's best friend missed the rendezvous at an M40 service station on Thursday.

But the French, the defending champions, are here, as are the Belgians.

The Germans lumber around in black-and-white tracksuits. Plus, there are Danes.

And all the way from North Carolina - braving the transatlantic rift over Iraq - an American squad, feted by the hosts like gallant sanction-busters.

Table football - aka babyfoot or foosball - is big business, and its promoters hope that with events such as this it will one day take its place beside snooker, darts and table tennis as a fully-fledged international sport.

[Click here for table football glossary](#)

"What we want to do is eventually have a world circuit, like in golf and tennis, with maybe four or five major tournaments every year around the world," says Ludovic Neri, director of the French Table Football Federation.

"But before that we need to regularise the game."

The biggest challenge is the multiplicity of table types and rules that prevail in different countries.

In France, they play on classic bonzini tables - with a linoleum pitch, heavy players and a cork ball.

The Italians play on garlando, which has a much faster surface and use a harder ball.

The Americans use tornado tables, which are also very quick.

And the game's laws have been a law unto themselves.

"I used to joke that the French rules could be summed up in four words: Francais oui, Anglais non," says Boris Atha, a British player taking part in the individuals competition in Paris.

"The French used to have a lot of bizarre ideas - like you couldn't score from the midfield or if the ball bounced out of the goal it counted double."

He added: "And at local level there are still as many different sets of rules as there are cafes.

Mass production



Players have come from across the world to compete



World champion Frederic Collignon, from Belgium, shows off his skills

Table footballers seek global glory By Hugh Schofield

"But thanks to the international federation things are getting more consistent."

They say that table football was invented in France around 100 years ago.

In fact it almost certainly developed simultaneously in many places as carpenters turned out wooden toys to simulate the newly-official game of soccer.

What is certain is that in the years after World War I it became immensely popular in France - disabled veterans particularly took to it - and mass production of tables started.

"I began playing in about 1930 when babyfoot had just started," said Bernard Jeanbernard, an 84 year-old wielding the rods in the veterans' competition.

"I still play because it is in my blood, and I like beating the youngsters."

In the 1950s babyfoot developed its cult status. Every village bar had its bonzini table, and the youths gathered round it aspired to a broody Jean-Paul Belmondo cool.

This was when GIs returning to the United States brought with them the name "foosball" - a corruption of the German - and with their newly-honed European skills wiped the floor with those who had stayed at home.

And this was also the time when generations of British youngsters began to discover the seductive thrill of the game on summer holidays at campsites and hotels in France.

Nowadays the sport is played by millions across the world, and in Europe and the US the big manufacturers are increasingly marketing their tables for home use.

In Britain alone 10,000 tables were sold last year.

"It's a real game, against a real opponent, with a real ball, in real time," says Mr Atha.

"And the beauty is you can keep playing it until you drop."

[Click here to return](#)

Table football glossary

- PIN: Ball held in stationary position by player prior to shot or pass.
- SPIN: Spinning rods is allowed in France if the ball is controlled by a player, but not otherwise. All spinning is banned in the US.
- JAR: When a pinned ball is dislodged by an opponent's slamming rod. Banned, but rule difficult to enforce.
- GAMELLE: Ball enters opponent's goal, but rebounds into play. In cafe rules, a point is deducted from opponent.
- ALLER A LA PECHE: In café rules, a player can snatch the ball from an opponent's goal and the opponent then loses a point.
- DEMI: After certain infractions both players slide two counters to the middle of the score-rod, and the next goal scores double.