

## Country flipping out over foosball

Manufacturer scores big on domestic game market in table football

By Vanessa Bulkacz  
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GÓÓÓÓÓL!!!!

It's a sound that can be heard at almost any pub in Prague, on any given evening. It's the sound emanating from the foosball table, and for one local company it's the sound of money.

While popular everywhere in Europe, the foosball craze that started here in the late 1990s, when the Czech national league was formed, is growing at a feverish pace.

When the national league, the Ceska foosballova organizace (CFO), was founded by a foosball enthusiast in 1998, just six teams were registered. Now, six years later, CFO boasts over 200 registered teams nationwide, and an estimated 3,000 tables are constructed each year in the Czech Republic. In a country of only 10 million people, that's a lot of foosball and that means big business for Prague 10-based bar-game manufacturer Rosengart, which has combined the country's love of pub culture and soccer with a unique and successful business plan.

Josef Soucek, a Rosengart employee, chief of CFO and editor-in-chief of the official CFO magazine *Trefa*, says the game is popular because bars are popular here. "It's a pub sport," he says.

Martin Barjaktarevic, a CFO league player since 1999, agrees. "It's great. It's like having a little soccer game right in the bar," he says.

Rosengart opened for business in 1995, making digital jukeboxes, karaoke machines and electronic dartboards. But after CFO was founded in 1998, owner David Vrablik immediately made his company the main sponsor of the league and also signed on as the captain of the Rosengart team.

It was only after Rosengart employee Jan Mares suggested to Vrablik in 2000 that the company should start producing tables that things really started to take off.

### A different approach

In addition to sponsoring the national league, Vrablik, also a foosball enthusiast, decided to go about the business a little differently from his competitors. Bota, Rosengart's main domestic competitor, and foreign foosball manufacturers sell league-quality tables to pubs for 30,000 to 60,000 Kc (\$1,100 to \$2,200).

Rosengart, on the other hand, lends its machines to pubs rent-free and takes 40 to 50 percent of each table's monthly draw. The company also provides a full range of repair services for 1,500 Kc per repair. And the company will only repossess the table if it earns less than 2,000 Kc per month for three months in a row.

Because of these practices, the company has become popular with small pubs that might not otherwise be able to afford to buy and maintain a foosball table. One such place is Bar Molekula in Zizkov, which opened in September 2002 and immediately rented a table.

When the bar started having league play in January 2003, business picked up. "We definitely have more business on the nights we have league," bartender Tomas Cambal says.

By renting rather than selling their tables, and by sponsoring the national foosball league, Rosengart has engendered tremendous product loyalty from pub staff. But in addition to their small-business-friendly practices, players and



Libor Kodl and Ladislav Tuma hope to make the June foosball finals.

#### GOALKEEPERS

##### A look at foosball figures

- **Estimated value of the Czech foosball industry:** 100 million-200 million Kc (\$3.8 million-\$7.7 million) annually

- **Number of Czech companies manufacturing foosball tables:** 3

- **Number of Czech companies renting foosball tables and sponsoring the national league:** 1, Rosengart

- **Number of companies worldwide**

bar staff alike assert that the company's popularity can be attributed to the quality of the product. "Rosengart is the best foosball company in the Czech Republic," Cambal says. "Their tables don't have glass on the top, which is better for competitive play -- there is better contact with the ball, and the player has more control over the flippers."

renting foosball tables and sponsoring the national league: 1, Rosengart

• **Rosengart's annual estimated worth:** 70 million Kc

Soucek says no other foosball manufacturer rents their respective tables and also sponsors a national league, making Rosengart unique in the world. The company's sponsorship responsibilities aren't insignificant, and they include providing tournament tables and publishing the CFO magazine, which has a circulation of 5,000 and is distributed free of charge. In addition, Rosengart keeps track of the very complex official rankings of not only all 200 national championship teams, which range from four to eight members each, but also cup tournaments, where singles and doubles can vie for the local, regional and national cups.

Tabulating the charts and designating the winners is no small task, given the complexity of the league system. "Other countries have league play," Soucek says, "but they don't have such an organized league network." Cups and prizes are given out after the final competitions in June and they aren't chump change: the National Cup prize is 100,000 Kc, with Rosengart picking up the tab, a donation to the nonprofit CFO that also serves as a tax break.

Rosengart has done so well it started an affiliate foosball-table company and the Slovenska foosballova organizace this year in Slovakia. The company is also considering expanding to Austria, Soucek says. That country only has local leagues, Soucek says, so many Austrian foosballers come to the Czech Republic for national-league play.

### Scoring big

Vrablik's decisions to become so closely entwined with both the foosball industry and the culture seem to be paying off. Based on the number of tables being manufactured nationally, Vrablik estimates the foosball industry in the Czech Republic to be worth from 100 million to 200 million Kc annually. Last year, Rosengart's turnover was 70 million Kc, and at any given time Rosengart has from 500 to 600 tables in locations throughout the country.

Rosengart has tremendous loyalty from its constituency. With business percolating in the Czech Republic and an eye toward future expansion in Slovakia and Austria, it looks as if Rosengart could score the most points overall.

-- Lenka Ponikelska contributed to this report.

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