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In the tiny northern town of Fort
Providence, N.W.T, table tennis helps
keep kids in shape and out of trouble

Power

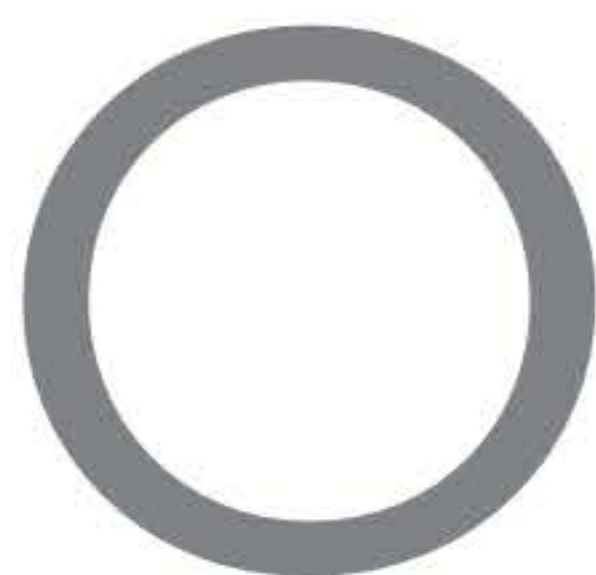
BY ELAINE ANSELM FROM *UP HERE*

*Two children playing ping pong
in Fort Providence, N.W.T.*

HUMAN INTEREST

of Pong





N THE SIDE OF the highway to Fort Providence, N.W.T., bison with massive heads and dwarfed back legs sit in clusters, paintbrush tails swishing.

It's October, and I'm riding along with Deh Gáh School principal Lois Philipp as she makes the three-hour drive south from Yellowknife. We left at 6 a.m. and we didn't stop to see the bison, or even to grab a coffee.

We roll past a truck stop just outside Fort Providence. Pinned up around the door are newspaper articles, event posters and advertisements: boat for sale, truck drivers wanted, floor hockey starting up at the gym. There's a missing person poster: a young man from Fort Providence hasn't been seen since April 2015. Like many communities in the North, this town of nearly 800 along the shore of the Mackenzie River is grappling with how to keep young people out of trouble.

There's been a spree of break-ins throughout the area in the last year. A community member launched a petition calling for the banishment of unruly youth, but the initiative thankfully lost steam. Fort Providence Chief Joachim Bonnetrouge has called the crimes a cry for help. He'd like to see an on-the-land camp established as an alternative to the justice system, with the aim of rehabilitating young people by connecting them to their traditional cultures—the vast majority

of the community is Dene and Métis. But the main question remains: how do you steer kids away from crime and keep them out of the crowds that breed it? This is a challenge for everyone, and especially for Philipp.

Part of the principal's strategy is to push for traditional programming. A week before I arrived, students—some as young as seven—had returned from 30 days in the bush with elders and leaders from the community, where they were trapping, harvesting wood and checking nets. There were no processed sugars, just berries they could pick if they wanted sweets. They hunted for their meat and ate a whole moose in eight days.

But Philipp knows young people need day-to-day support if the community wants to see substantial changes. "It's about creating opportunities and creating a safe space," she says. "A space where kids can be kids."

The Deh Gáh School has found an unlikely tool to help residents create that haven: table tennis.

I SEE THE plan in action soon after arriving in Fort Providence. A rope ladder is spread out across the school's gym floor. Students hop through, their knees lifted high. They move on to navigate brightly coloured cones spread evenly in a line, feet weaving to the left and right.

"Now do the same with a ping-pong ball," says Thorsten Gohl. And they do.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THORSTEN GOHL

Standing well over six feet, with curly brown hair to his shoulders, the coach is easy to spot. He's dressed in shorts and running shoes, despite the temperature hovering just above zero.

For the past two years, Gohl—a professional table tennis player from Germany—has been drilling his students on the basics and the not-so-basics of the sport. Some are getting it: one boy is confident, tapping the ball over his shoulder as he brings his paddle behind him, sending it back over to the front. Others are uninterested, to say the least: a boy in a black cap walks into class late and kicks an orange cone, which lands near my feet, before he takes a seat on the bench. By the end of the day, shards of white plastic ping-pong balls are scattered across the gym like eggshells. But the kids keep playing until the doors are locked for the night.

It's a good place to be in a small town with few other things to do.

IN THE FALL of 2013, two faculty members from Deh Gáh School, then vice-principal Jim Snider and his colleague Jeremy Kielstra, travelled south for a table tennis coaching clinic.

Snider's father-in-law got him into the sport back in 2012, while he was on a visit from Fort Providence down to Burnaby, B.C. Upon returning home, Snider got Kielstra on board. Soon they were playing on old tables they found in storage at the school. They

recognized the physical benefits of the sport—it could help kids stay fit—and because the sport only required two to four players, it was much easier to organize in a community of fewer than 800 people than, say, a game of volleyball. They decided to sign up for a coaching course in Vancouver. That's where they first met Gohl.



A YOUNG STUDENT
SERVES DIAGONALLY
ACROSS THE TABLE
AND DEFTLY KNOCKS
A COLOURFUL TARGET
CLEAR OFF THE EDGE.

Previously, Gohl was employed as a photographer in Vancouver when he found his way to Table Tennis Canada, the sport's national organization. He started working with them as a marketer and then began hosting coaching clinics across the country, including the one Kielstra and Snider attended. With Philipp's support, the educators organized Gohl's first visit to the North shortly after their Vancouver coaching camp.

In order to get funding to bring Gohl up to Fort Providence and purchase supplies, like new tables and paddles, they had to apply for grants. It was only a year and a half after starting the program that they established

an official organization: Table Tennis North. They also had to host tryouts for the 2014 Arctic Winter Games—an international tournament held every two years for athletes from across the circumpolar world.



TO KEEP STUDENTS
INTERESTED, ACTIVITIES
NEED CONSISTENT
LEADERSHIP. STABILITY
IS A CHALLENGE IN
THE TRANSIENT NORTH.

The Northwest Territories sent eight student athletes to compete in table tennis that year, but no one medalled. Nonetheless, the sport has been gaining momentum: 1,500 students came out to a tournament in Yellowknife in November, and seven communities were represented at the territorial championships this past January in Fort Providence. While Kielstra and Snider have moved on to the larger centres of Whitehorse and Yellowknife, Gohl is keeping the momentum going.

The coach has taken to the North, living in a blue trailer just off the main drag in Fort Providence. Bison wander into the swaths of grass between the homes at night, leaving behind dinner platter-sized piles of dung. Gohl spends most of his days at the school, coaching. He also manages

the Table Tennis North website and works on getting funding to take the sport across the territory. Up until recently, all the work was done strictly on a volunteer basis, and Gohl relied on his savings to pay bills. In December 2016, though, he received his permanent resident status in Canada and became a paid employee of the District Education Authority.

A RECENT GRADUATE of Deh Gáh School, Mikaela Vandell spent the better part of the fall working with Gohl, coaching students in table tennis. Mikaela is tall for an 18-year-old, with long, dark hair piled on her head. She walks into the school gym before classes start, a pink travel mug in hand. The territorial championships are a month away, and there's work to do.

Mikaela's been playing for two years. She competed at the Arctic Winter Games in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 2014 and again in Nuuk, Greenland, in 2016. The games are the major event for circumpolar youth, with indoor sports such as hockey, basketball and volleyball, and outdoor ones such as skiing, snowshoeing and dogsledding. In 2016, the N.W.T. won its first medal in table tennis: a silver in juvenile girls' doubles.

The improvement is exciting to Mikaela. "The first year was so bad. Everyone was so pro and we had just started out," she says. So she worked

on her serves, her returns and her fitness before and after school—she did a lot of jumping jacks. She’s been through the wringer. Now she can help others through it.

These students are starting out younger than Mikaela did. Summer Bonnetrouge is nine and has been playing for two years already. Standing at one end of the table, she serves diagonally across and knocks a colourful target, sitting just at the edge of the table, clear off. She grins, giggles and serves again.

Another player, 17-year-old Neilsen Vandell—Mikaela’s cousin—says he didn’t initially take to table tennis. It was hard at first to get the spin right. With the paddle in his hand, he demonstrates how the ball can take an unpredictable path if your opponent puts a spin on it. You’re best to return it, if you can, in the same manner. He flicks the paddle with his wrist, sending the imaginary ball spinning at me. At last year’s table tennis championships, he won third place in the under-18 boys’ division.

TO KEEP STUDENTS invested, activities need consistent leadership, says Philipp. That stability is a challenge in the transient North. There have been



Deh Gáh School graduate Mikaela Vandell at the 2016 Arctic Winter Games in Nuuk, Greenland.

teachers, similar to Snider and Kielstra, who have fostered an interest in certain sports in the past. But once they’ve moved on, that interest often wanes.

That’s why someone like Gohl is so important. He interacts playfully with the kids. He misses his shot and jumps in the air yelling “No!” He stamps both his feet in turn, laughing as he does. He thinks his sense of humour is what draws the students to table tennis. “I’m a fun guy,” he says, grinning.

For Mikaela, having a mentor has kept her interested and pushed her to improve. Leading up to the games, she and Gohl practised in the gym for an hour multiple times a week before school started.

She’s grown up playing sports, but with most games requiring more than two players, she says gathering enough

people can be tough. In soccer, she always played on teams from other communities. Numbers are a challenge—a reason Table Tennis North is a territory-wide organization. It's not just about Fort Providence.

Gohl wants to bring the sport to youth across the territory. Whenever he can, he travels throughout the North, teaching students and teachers to become coaches. "I'm a dreamer and crazy sometimes," Gohl says. "I said when I came here, 'In a year's time, I want to do 20 communities.'" He made his move to Fort Providence in September 2015, and while 20 may have been a lofty goal, he's already hit 13.

WHEN THE SCHOOL day ends, some familiar faces return to the gym. The tables are still set up in a line in the middle of the room, and the pile of paddles sits on the floor.

"Is it open? Can we play?" asks a boy in a black hoodie as he walks into the gym. He and a kid in a flat-brimmed baseball cap begin to rally. The white ball travels from paddle to

table, over the net to the other side of the table and up to the opposing paddle. "He got served!" the boy in the cap calls out, flicking his wrist as the ball sails past his opponent. They laugh and start again.

Two girls grab paddles and take up another table. The first serve bounces off the green surface and carries straight through the air, hitting Gohl square on the forehead. "Nice shot," he jokes.

At the far end of the gym, a woman in an orange hoodie begins rallying with a young boy. She has a long, dark braid hanging under a baseball cap that matches her sweater. "That's her grandson," Gohl tells me. I'd seen her earlier that day, standing at the door of the gym with an apron on. Veronica Bonnetrouge is the school's cook, as well as the janitor. Her daughter, the young boy's mother, shows up and joins the match as well. The mother grins as her son's shot flies over her right shoulder. Here, all three generations are playing together. Table tennis is becoming more than just something to do. **R**

FROM "THE OTHER NORTHERN PADDLE SPORT," BY ELAINE ANSELM, *UP HERE* (DECEMBER 2016), UPHERE.CA



UTMOST DEVOTION

Life is nothing if you're not obsessed.

JOHN WATERS, director and writer