

Chapter 18 - The Margolins

At this point, it would be appropriate to remind the reader that *Family Pong* actually went beyond the immediacy of the Zakarin family. Michael, David, and Susan Margolin, the children of Evelyn's brother Jess, were also active competitors.

David, a naturally talented boy (who was also an excellent tennis player, and could sing and dance and act), proved to be especially adept. His accomplishments, including a rating that was higher than those of Mort, Ev, and Chuck, were especially impressive when considering that he rarely practiced, and almost never traveled outside of the Greater New York area to participate in a competition.

David remembered with special fondness his string of wins over the not-yet-championship-caliber Eric Boggan. "I beat him 21-2 once," he said. "Not bad when you consider how far he progressed."

David's older brother, Michael, was more involved in the organizational aspects of the sport, running a popular table tennis club at Hewlett High School, then pioneering the establishment of interscholastic competition between Long Island high schools.

Even little sister Susan was an occasional participant who played in a number of local events, and brought home some prizes as well.



The Margolin Family in 1975.
From left to right: David, Susan, Toni, Jess, and Michael.

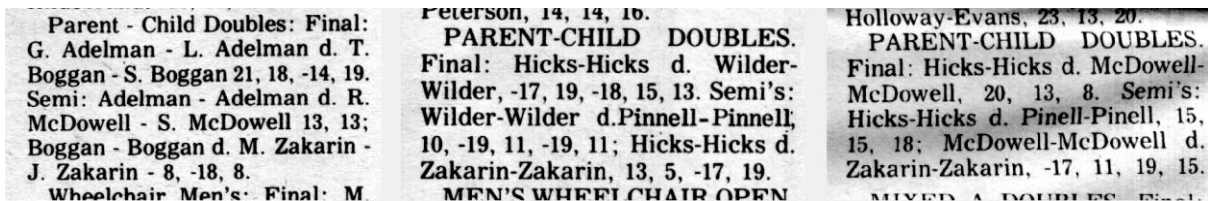
Chapter 19 - Fighting Family

As a “ping-pong family”, we enjoyed the benefits of joint participation in table tennis competitions. As often as we could, we would be present at each other’s matches, rooting for one another, and providing advice between games.

Evelyn: *You know, there was a very small number of good women’s players on Long Island, so I found myself in demand as a Mixed Doubles partner. It was quite intimidating playing with and against the best men’s players in the area, and my nerves would often get the better of me. Jeff thought that I could relieve the pressure by taking a deep breath before starting to play. Taking his advice, I took a deep breath, and as the point progressed, I started shaking uncontrollably. Even Jeff could see it from his seat on the bench. At the end of the point, he whispered, “Don’t forget, Mom, you have to exhale, too.”*

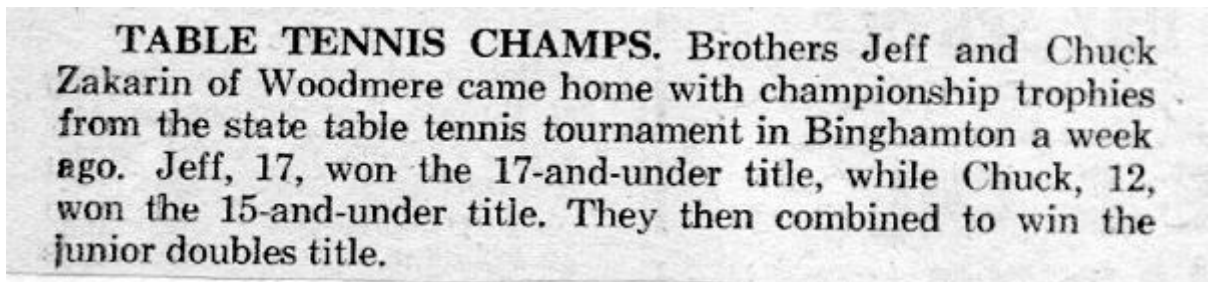
Having a family member in one’s corner helped turn a losing game into a winner on many occasions. And if it didn’t, at least there would be someone else to blame.

We also found ourselves partnering each other in doubles events. Mort and I would play together annually in the Parent & Child Doubles competition at the U.S. Open. For three consecutive years (1972-1974), we narrowly missed a berth in the finals and a chance for the national championship, losing each time in the semi-finals.



Left: Topics, May/June 1972.
 Center: Topics, May/June 1973.
 Right: Topics, May/June 1974

Chuck and I also played together a number of times, most successfully in the New York State Championships in 1975, where we won the Junior Doubles title.



Newsday, 3 March 1975

FAMILY PONG

In addition, we would always be available to console each other after losses. The trip home from a competition would always be difficult, as at least one of us would inevitably be disappointed with his own performance.

Mort, of course, was the family spokesman. When Evelyn won the Women's Singles at the annual Town of Huntington tournament in January 1976, she got a lot of attention from the local press, but preferred to let Mort do the talking.

***Evelyn:** After the tournament, a reporter and cameraman arrived to do a television spot. Mort had so much experience with the press - I let him handle the interview. Later, a reporter from Newsday, the Long Island daily, came to visit. He asked me my age. At first, I answered, "Old enough to know better!", but he persisted. Finally, I relented, and the details were printed in the newspaper. My friends thought that this was very embarrassing! I threw out the article, but I still have the photograph.*

Evelyn won the Town of Huntington title again in 1980.

TABLE TENNIS. The fifth annual Town of Huntington table tennis tournament drew 380 participants in 14 events, making it the third largest event in the United States. Dan Green of Huntington won the open men's championship and Evelyn Zakarin of Woodmere the open women's title. Sid Jacobs of Central Islip was the senior champ and Mike Lardon

Joe Krupinski, Newsday, January 1976

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Newsday, January 1976



Photo courtesy of Fred Danner

HUNTINGTON WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS – BOB PENDEL, DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EVENTS FOR THE TOWN OF HUNTINGTON RECREATION & PARKS DEPT., CONGRATULATES WINNERS OF THE GIRLS & WOMEN'S EVENTS. (L TO R) HELEN GNIAZDOWSKI, FINALIST-HUNTINGTON WOMEN'S SINGLES; DEBORAH CICHOCKI, WINNER NOVICE GIRLS 17; BARBARA ANSELMO, FINALIST-OPEN GIRLS SINGLES; TERESA GREEN, WINNER-HUNTINGTON WOMEN'S SINGLES; SUSAN HOFHEIMER, WINNER-OPEN GIRLS SINGLES; JANET NEWBOLD, FINALIST-OPEN WOMEN'S SINGLES; & EVELYN ZAKARIN, WINNER-OPEN WOMEN'S SINGLES.

Evelyn, Town of Huntington Winner, standing on right.
Topics, March/April 1976

Chapter 20 - Family Honor

In the months following my confusing experience at the Mount Airy Junior Team Trial, something inside of me began to change. Despite all the support I had received over the years from my parents, I was slowly coming to the conclusion that their involvement in my ping-pong career was inhibiting, and not aiding, my progress as a player. The time had come for me to land on my own two feet and establish myself as a player in my own right. I was 16, and ready for independence.

So in November 1974, I was particularly thrilled to travel on my own to the city of Minneapolis for the annual Thanksgiving-weekend National Team Championships. With my teammates, Carl Danner and Rutledge Barry, we easily qualified to compete in the elite junior division.

In our match against the local team from Minnesota, I was paired to play against John Soderberg. John and I had never spoken about the Mount Airy selection incident, but it was obviously on both of our minds. For him, this was undoubtedly going to be a grudge match, a chance to prove that Mort had been wrong after all. For me, nothing less than family honor was at stake, and I felt that this was a match that I *must not lose*.

The match started evenly, and we split the first two games. In the deciding 3rd, however, I began pulling away, building and maintaining a 7-8 point lead. Suddenly, as the outcome was becoming apparent, there was a change. John started stalling. Now this was a well-known tactic for changing the momentum of a game, and a personal favorite of mine. But John started carrying it to an extreme, and since we were playing without an umpire, there wasn't much that I could do about it. Before serving, he would hold the ball, bounce it on the floor, off his racket, on the table, etc. When I started complaining vocally, he stuck to his tactic even more resolutely. I grew increasingly agitated, and my lead quickly collapsed. But, toward the end of the game, I managed to regain my composure, and a thin lead. The match ended in a 21-19 victory. I left the hall and took a deep breath. Family honor had been upheld.

FAMILY PONG



Jeff in 1974.

Chapter 21 - Money Time

“Money Time,” any basketball fan will tell you, is that critical moment when great athletes lift themselves to their highest possible level of performance. For me, spending my last remaining months in the Junior division, the spring of 1975 was “Money Time:”

May 3-4	Syracuse Open
May 17-18	Long Island Closed
May 22-25	U.S. Open, in Houston, Texas
May 29-June 1	Canadian Open, in Quebec City
June 3	Friendship match with the South Korean team on Long Island

It was time to deliver the goods.

By early spring, preparations were in high gear. I was able to spend more time training, as the demands on a high-school student in the final semester of his 12th year are not so great. Moreover, Mort had gone to my teachers and convinced them to help me by allowing me to delay work on various projects until *after* the competitions. As my physical conditioning improved, I made the somewhat risky decision to use thicker sponge rubber on my racket, moving from 1.5mm to 2.0mm. I would have less ball control, but the extra thickness would add a bit more “zing” to my topspin drives.

Things were progressing well. In Syracuse, I had an upset win over the U.S.’s #19 rated Men’s player, my best win to date. The U.S. Open was a few weeks away, and I was as well prepared as I could realistically expect to be.

FAMILY PONG



Mort, Captain of the U.S. Team, at the opening of the South Korea-U.S. Friendship Match on Long Island, with his Korean counterpart, June 1975.



The Israeli team, which arrived to participate in the U.S. Open and Canadian Open in May 1975. 20 years later, I would find myself playing on the same "Hapoel" Tel-Aviv team together with Yosef Shifman, far left.

Chapter 22 - Houston, We Have a Problem



We arrived in Houston a day before the start of the U.S. Open. I was full of hope, expectation, and the awareness that in this, my last year in the junior ranks, the U.S. Open was my last chance to win *big*.

I was seeded #14 in the Boys Under 17 Singles, definitely not one of the favorites, but was feeling confident nonetheless.

The outcome was anti-climactic.

I lost, in the round of 32, to the unseeded Californian, Chris Rosal, 3 games to zero. The match was decided quickly and undramatically. I played hopelessly, in a state of shock – as if, on an in-flight visit to the cockpit in an airplane metaphor, having suddenly realized that there was no one at the controls.

I have no other recollection of the Open, except that following the loss, Mort tried to console me and brought me to a local pub for a drink. The bartender looked at me and asked for identification. Mort growled, “He’s 18! Now give him that beer!”

Chapter 23 - Quebec

There was no more time for self-pity. A few days later, I was off in a friend's motor home to Quebec City for the Canadian Open. On my own, without accompanying family members, I was left to concentrate solely on... myself.

The result was a total rebound from the previous week's disaster. I was now fully comfortable with the thicker rubber, and was playing the best table tennis of my life.

True, in the Boys Under 17 Singles, I was outplayed in the quarter-final by Canadian psycho Brian Zembik, but my game kept progressing. I won the Men's Class "B" Singles event, and reached the semi-final of the Men's Class "A" Singles. Finally, in the Men's Singles, I was able to advance several rounds and met Choi Kim-Il, #4 on the South Korean squad. I lost, 3 games to 1, but was left feeling that I had fought my best fight.

The real treat, however, came in the first round of the Men's Doubles, where my pick-up partner, Mike Stern, and I, drew the soon-to-be World Men's Doubles Champions, Dragutin Surbek and Anton Stipanovic of Yugoslavia. Forget the score – this was the level of play that I had seen, but never before experienced first-hand. Power and magic – all rolled into one!

BOYS 17. Final: Rick Seemiller d. Brian Zembik, 20, 14. Semi's: Seemiller d. Mike Stern, 18, 17; Zembik d. Pierre Normandin, -11, 14, 10. Quarter's: Seemiller d. Victor Skujins, 10, 16; Stern d. Perry Schwartzberg, 20, -12, 18; Normandin d. Rutledge Barry, 17, -14, 13; Zembik d. Jeff Zakarin, 10, 11.
BOYS 15 Final: Pierre Norman-

MEN'S A. Final: Dave Philip d. Rick Seemiller, 19, -18, 15. Semi's: Philip d. Mike Bush, - 16, 19, 7; Seemiller d. Jeff Zakarin, -13, 19, 15. Quarter's: Seemiller d. Tim Boggan, 13, 18; Zakarin d. Guy Germaine, 18, -15, 17; Philip d. Brian Zembik, - 12, 7, 8; Mike Bush d. Bob Quinn, 17, 10.
MEN'S B. Final: Jeff Zakarin d. Ray Mack, 10, -16, 9. Semi's: Zakarin d. Ralph Robinson, -20, 12, 15; Mack d. Lewis Chan, 12, 23.
WOMEN'S A. Final: Ellen Man-

Jeff's results from the 1975 Canadian Open - Boys Under 17, Men's Class "A" and "B" Singles.
 Topics, July/August 1975