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Cornhusker State Games: Welcome to the world of foosball

By BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON / Lincoln Journal Star

Journal Star sportswriter Brian Christopherson gives a first-hand account of the foosball competition at the Cornhusker State Games. If you want to play foosball with the big dogs, you better come with more than just two bananas. I did not know that when I woke up Sunday morning. I do today. I'd bury my ego right here and now if it could be located. It was lost yesterday, lost over a table of miniature soccer men.

There were 20 competitors in the open division of this year's Cornhusker State Games foosball competition. I finished 20th.

I certainly didn't expect to win but there were high hopes of finishing at least third-to-last, or even better if the foos gods and their little club feet chose to whisk me to higher places.

Riding high off the potassium of two bananas, I strutted into the Farmland Building in State Fair Park. Seemed a good day to foos.

Then an 18-year-old with a ponytail walked into my life.

Natasha Kraus, pride of the little town of Madrid, had come five hours with her family to play some foosball.

Natasha was to be my first foe in the competition.

Before we could begin, I wanted to know a little bit about the person across the table.

It was the basic type of questions one might ask a new face. Madrid, huh? How far is that from Lincoln? Going to college? Yeah? That's cool.

A voice interrupted.

"Are you writing an article or trying to pick up her number? I'm her father."

I'd like to say that voice made me tense

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and gave me an excuse as to why I didn't proceed to play proper foosball. But the fact is this: I could play Natasha 50 games and if I won once, I'd award myself a celebratory ice cream cone at McDonald's.

If she wasn't scoring, I was clumsily scoring on myself. Ever played a game so bad that your competitor actually started to root for you out of pity?

That's what was going on here. Giggling her way through two easy victories (foos rules say first one to win two out of three games to five goals is the victor), Natasha scored 10 goals to my four.

The beating took all of five minutes. It had to be bad because some of my new foosball friends were trying to buoy my spirits afterward.

None of these new friends were more helpful than 28-year-old Jason Shovlain, a Lincoln man who plays foosball with headphones on, the rock band "Tool" blaring heavy metal into his ears.

This guy would drink foosball out of a cup if they served it. As he told me: "You know, in the '70s, there were more foosball tables than there were pool tables. Sometimes I wish I lived in that era."

He then showed me a "Snake Shot," a slick maneuver that allows your center forward to score goals at will against bush-league players like me.

Other things learned from Jason:

-- A lot of bar room foosball players think you're supposed to serve the ball into play right down the middle after a goal. Not so. If you're serving, you're supposed to try to drop it so it goes to your players.

-- Any players who illegally spin the handles and win and think they're hot shots need to be taught a lesson.

-- The middle rod — the one with five men — is the one where most often games are won or lost.

With that being the case, I had no chance of winning. I hate to say this about the men on my middle rod, but their effort was worse than the U.S. team's at the World Cup. I guess I'll take some of the blame since it was my duty to make them move and all, but geez ...

In my second game, I got a mop ran over my face again. This time Justin Barraclough, a 35-year-old from North Platte, did the work.

After reporting the loss to the front table, I was told I would be moved to Level III (the lowest level) and that I could have a 30-minute lunch break.

A roast beef sandwich with curly fries and cheese sauce from Arby's provided renewed energy. Even the spilled cheese sauce on the shirt did not deter hope. The next game would be different.

My fire was quickly doused. I got what seems a bad draw in my first game in Level III, against 26-year-old Evan Fischer, a player much too skilled to be playing anyone of my caliber at this stage in the day.

Evan got so bored in our game he tried to keep himself entertained by trying a trick shot (The Aerial), in which he cleverly put the ball on the back of his defender's peg leg and flipped a rainbow through the air. To my credit, he did not score doing that. It's about the only way he didn't score.

By then, it was no secret to me that the kind of foosball these guys play is about nine clouds above most of the amateur stuff that goes on around this city. In many of those games, the ball just hops with no rhyme or reason about the table.

With skilled players, everything is calculated and the passes from one player to another are ridiculously accurate. And if they get the ball to their forward line, count the goal almost before it goes in.

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The best player at the State Games was probably Eric Stumpf, a 36-year-old from Omaha. He can beat the best foosball players in the world when he's on his game.

But 17 years ago, he couldn't beat a man off the street.

"When I started, my friend killed me, just walked all over me, and I said, 'Give me two weeks and I'll kick your (butt),' " Stumpf said. "Sure enough, two weeks later, I came back and kicked his (butt)."

Here's thinking it's not best for me to make any such two-week declarations after losing my final game of the day to 22-year-old Neil Brown of Grand Island.

When it was all said and done, I had been outscored 40-14.

But this can be said: Even though I got beat like a mule, a good time was had regardless.

There was even a post-foos ice cream cone, a reward surely deserved for the fourth best player in Level III.

Reach Brian Christopherson at 473-7438 or bchristopherson@journalstar.com.

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