

Obsessive "Foosers" descend on Dallas for foosball championships

By **PAUL J. WEBER**, Associated Press Writer

DALLAS — At three minutes past midnight in an airport hotel, John Zoller begins a fifth day unsure whether his father and sister are alive back in New Orleans.

But, boy, is he ever rocking the five rod at Table 34.

Beneath a purple LSU hat and behind square glasses, Zoller's eyes stalk the foosball. His arms move in jerky thrusts like he's pulling levers on a backhoe. His fingers tickle the handle like a dragster itching to shift gears.

Finally, Zoller winds his wrist left before sharply cranking it in the other direction, spinning the plastic attackers that slap the chalky red ball down the table for the winning goal.

"I feel guilty, but in a way it's making me play better," said Zoller, who left New Orleans in his pickup a day before Hurricane Katrina ravaged the area where his dad and sister remained. "I'm just trying to concentrate on the table. It's like having something next to you so big that you don't look at it."

Table 34 and 129 others like it are arranged in long rows inside the DFW Airport Hyatt Regency ballroom, a wide space suited for high school proms and conventions for insurance salesmen. But, through Monday, this ballroom belongs to the World Foosball Championships and "Foosers," some 400 who took foosball beyond fraternity house basements and smoky pool halls and made it a competitive lifestyle.

The \$150,000 pot has lured Foosers from Japan to Costa Rica. Chris Marks of Germany spends two-thirds of his 30 vacation days each year at foosball tournaments like this one. Around 1 a.m. Friday, Marks is hunched over Table 24 across from the world's best player, Frederico Collignon, a skinny, thin-armed Belgian who beats all comers while wearing a golf glove on his right hand and a fanny pack cinched tightly around his waist.

Free beer is poured into plastic cups that Foosers leave empty in stacks beneath the tables. Giant plasma televisions air video from a camera mounted above the championship table. During the tournament, channel three in every hotel room carries the foosball feed nonstop so players can watch when they're not downstairs.

Not that many leave the ballroom. And many who do are headed to a nearby parking garage that tournament organizers partitioned and converted into a makeshift bar for Foosers. It's like walking into a tavern built by set designers for a television sitcom — purposefully dim lighting, neon beer signs and, yes, more foosball tables.

If the ballroom is where Foosers are herded for showtime, the Parking Lot bar is the artificial habitat where they retreat.

"It's what a lot of these guys are used to," said Dave Courington, one of the tournament's organizers. "We wanted to make them feel at home."

The gist of foosball is simple: First player or team to five wins. Games last around 15 minutes. Fooshers can't talk while the ball is in play and — contrary to the first instinct of every first-time player in a college dorm commons area — it's illegal to slap the handles and spin the rods like an axle.

And everyone in the ballroom is a Fooser. Everyone.

College blondes whose strategically low jeans stop just below their back tattoos watch boyfriends, then dart across the room when their game is announced. Moms who sit tableside wearing beige capris quietly watch their kids — then declare they've got next. Lisa Pride of Columbus, Ohio, said she won tournaments in the 1980s with daughter Lindsay Albert sleeping in a stroller parked next to her table.

Albert, now 20, teams with Marks in mixed doubles. The German is an intense player, cupping his hands near his mouth and loudly exhaling before touching the handles after each dead ball. When he and Albert score, Marks plants a hard open-hand slap on his partner's rear. The slap is doubly hard after winning the match. Nevermind that across the room — perhaps watching — is Albert's boyfriend. "It's no big deal," Albert said. "In the foosball world, it's kosher. Not a lot of couples play together anyway."

Alex Pipkin, a 10-year-old from Montana whose head peaks just over the table, plays while standing on a red box his dad built exclusively for foosball. Steve Mohs, a roof contractor from Minneapolis, slips on black sweatbands sporting the Air Jordan logo on his wrists and forehead for every game.

Alabama's Cindy Head plays beneath banners that have her name printed on just about every one. With more than 35 world titles, she is the most accomplished women's Fooser ever. About the only tournaments she didn't win were those she couldn't attend during her first years as a Birmingham police officer, since she didn't have the seniority to get the vacation time.

Seven weeks ago, Head was trying to arrest a mental patient when he jumped and kicked her in the chest, knocking her to the ground. The fall fractured her right wrist.

"I wouldn't let the doctor cast it," said Head, her wrist heavily taped. "He asked me if I realized I could break it, and I said, 'I can break it after the world championships.'"

Asked why they play to such an obsessive level, Foosers almost reflexively say it's the competition. It's fast paced. It demands skill. Anyone can become good and every kind of person plays. Doctors and lawyers faced off this past Thursday, on the first day of the five-day tourney, against students and freedivers.

Then there's Spirit Mollice.

There are many Foosers better than Mollice in the ballroom. But no one else has a foosball tattoo on the right forearm or a gold-plated foosball figure dangling from a thick, half-pound gold chain.

"I've won enough tournament jackets now for every day of the week," said Mollice, who has played for 10 years and lives in Dallas. "I don't care about that anymore. It's just so addictive. It's the competition. It's more than just a bar game."

Tournament organizers hoped to convince Fox Sports of the same thing. This year's world championships were an important one to organizers, who invited some of the network's representatives in hopes of selling foosball as the next game to make the transition from barrooms to television.

Other than the occasional brief segment on local newscasts or ESPN, foosball has never been aired. But the sport does have a full-time play-by-play announcer, Jim Stevens, a Los Angeles native whose self-described style blends the quick cadence of Lakers legend Chick Hearn and the story-weaving of Dodgers great Vin Scully.

Stevens' trademark line is "He strokes the long!" — which, loosely translated, means a shot from one end of the table to the other. He hopes he can soon deliver the phrase to television audiences, and not just to Foosers who buys his volumes of DVDs to scout opponents.

That includes Minnesota's Dave Gummesson, a multiple world champion who approached Stevens late Thursday and handed him \$80 in rolled-up twenties.

"Got to stay on top," Gummesson said.

Zoller is no longer that competitive. Since arriving in Dallas he's text-messed his dad in New Orleans, even though he knows his father doesn't know how text-messaging works. Zoller isn't even sure the messages are reaching his phone.

After the tournament, Zoller said he'll print up some business cards and buy some tools. Until he can return to New Orleans, he'll try to find work as a paint contractor.

He'll start over with a Foosher who has offered him a place to stay — and there are plenty to choose from.

"Foosers are like family," said Zoller, 49. "They're all real concerned. It's hard to play a game with the destruction, but these are the people I know. They're my family."

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