

# Pingpong tourney has Chinese flavor

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**Saturday's winners**

**Men** – Aijun Zhu

**Women** – Ying Lu

**Youth** – Kelia Li

*Clint Keller | The Journal Gazette*

*John Lock, left, and Aijun Zhu play in the Friendship Ping Pong Tournament on Saturday at Messiah Lutheran Church.*

After more than an hour of tournament play Saturday, two men stood separated from victory by only their skill and a sometimes cantankerous orange pingpong ball.

The finale to the Friendship Ping Pong Tournament took place shortly after noon at Messiah Lutheran Church, where the hollow sound of bouncing pingpong balls mingled with discussion and laughter after the completion of the women's and youth tournaments.

The men's tournament finale saw Wei Song, 46, on one side of the net and Aijun Zhu, 38, on the other.

Song served the ball by bouncing it on the floor before delivering a furious paddle-slap, but Zhu had a softer serving technique.

Zhu also tended to smile more frequently than Song, who sometimes slapped his paddle in seeming frustration when the ball went astray or a play went wrong.

The smiles seemed more understandable later, after Zhu was given a medal and declared the men's champion.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Zhu admitted he planned to play only a round or two during

Saturday's tournament before going shopping with his family.

Pingpong and, ultimately, victory, seemed the better option for Zhu.

“It's better than shopping, yes,” he said.

Plans for the tournament were launched by the Fort Wayne Chinese Association, and the Three Rivers Table Tennis Club played host at the church, which boasts 10 pingpong tables.

The Fort Wayne Chinese Association is a group that aims to bring together people from a variety of backgrounds who share an interest in Chinese culture.

About 17 players participated in the tournament, which organizers hope to make an annual event open to the general public as a way to share the game, which is especially popular in China.

The event also aims to promote the association, said Yanni Qu, association president.

Tom Dannenfelser, 57, of Fort Wayne, organizer for the Three Rivers Table Tennis Club, said his group also benefited by hosting the event.

“We like having them here because we're trying to promote the sport of table tennis here in Fort Wayne, too,” Dannenfelser said.

After Zhu emerged as the victor with the best scores in three of five rounds, the medal presentations took place. Champions were directed to stand on a worn, white plastic stepstool large enough to accommodate only one champion at a time.

The champions took turns stepping onto the stool before bowing their heads, so medals held by red, white and blue ribbons could be draped over their heads, while spectators muttered words such as “symbolic” and “Olympics.”

Before Zhu had his moment on the plastic stepstool of honor, youth winner Kelia Li, 14, and women's winner Ying Lu, 43, received their medals.

It was the first pingpong tournament victory for all three champions, who each touted the fun the game offers and expressed surprise at their respective victories.

“I can't believe I'm a winner,” Lu said.



*Clint Keller / The Journal Gazette*

*Gary Pentecost was among dozens who gathered Saturday at Messiah Lutheran Church for the Friendship Ping Pong Tournament.*