

Ji WINNING

Sophomore Jiwen Wu finds success in table tennis



►written by Julia Poe ►photos by Leah

Forehand. Forehand. Forehand. Then a sudden switch to backhand. The ball whistles over the net and sophomore Jiwen Wu lets out a string of Mandarin Chinese, teasing his dad. He's using his dad to warm up for his typical three-hour Saturday afternoon training session at the Athletic Club of Overland Park.

Wu's training doesn't involve pushups or wind sprints. His sport isn't one of brute strength. Table tennis is one of skill.

It takes skill to see where the 40 mm wide ball is going and stop it in less than a second. It takes skill to know how to angle a paddle to cause different types of spin, or to anticipate the type of shot the other player is taking.

"Soccer or basketball, you need strength for them, but table tennis is all about the skill," Wu says. "That's kind of good for me. What I need is to be able to be fast and to have quick reactions so that I can stop the ball."

Wu spends around 10 hours in private lessons and practices at the Athletic Club every week. The time is spent working towards a single goal — a professional ranking.

In the U.S., players are ranked on a number scale. The world champion is ranked around 2900 and most professionals are ranked at 2000 or above. Currently, Wu is aiming to raise his 1750 ranking to somewhere between 2000 and 2300.

After getting warmed up with his dad, Jiwen greets a fellow player, Hao, who he plays against often. They chat in a mix of Mandarin and English and then the two begin a match. Hao is ranked at 1900 and has played for over 30 years. His powerful volleys cause Jiwen to overshoot the table three times in a row.

"He's nervous," Hao says, retrieving the ball as it skitters across the court. "He never misses that much."

The sophomore's interest in table tennis began in the second grade, when Wu was still living in Guangzhou, China. Wu's father, Jianheng, introduced him to the sport through a local club. Jianheng had played since he was 10, when he took a door off its hinges and placed it on bricks to create makeshift table in order to practice.

"He wanted me to learn table tennis because he really enjoyed it as a boy," Jiwen says, translating for his dad from Mandarin to English. "He says it's good for me, to keep in shape, and I seem to really like it. He hopes that I keep doing it for awhile, like the other guys here [at the club]."

In seventh grade, his family moved to Kansas so that Wu's mother could become a medical researcher for the pharma-

cology department at the University of Kansas Medical Center. Wu thought that he was leaving table tennis behind in China, since he didn't know of any leagues or coaches in the area. The loss was just another difficulty of moving to an entirely new country.

But after a year of not playing, Wu found a local coach named Xueying Li. Although Jiwen struggled at first due to taking time off, playing the sport helped him with the transition from China to the U.S. After several weeks, Wu and his coach were amazed at his rapid improvement.

"He is a very good student, very smart," Li said. "He works very hard, and he is good both at forehand and backhand, so that is very good. We're aiming for him to get 1900 or 2000 this year, and he'll do it. I know it."

When Wu began playing in America, table tennis became less of a hobby as Jiwen became more competitive and enjoyed spending more time at the Athletic Club. Although he had less free time because of his homework load, Wu still made time to train and grow as a player. Playing at the Athletic Club brought a new perk — Wu met Samuel Liu, a fellow sophomore, who quickly became his friend and partner for practicing and doubles competitions.

The two are well-matched and ranked evenly around 1750. As Liu and Wu play a match against each other, their playing styles compliment each others' strengths. Liu, an aggressive player, is able to overpower Wu with hard forehands, while Wu bests him with repetition and finesse.

"It's so good to have Jiwen, because before I was just playing with a lot of adults," Liu says. "We push each other really well since we're so evenly matched, but we're able to have fun with it, too."

The boys laugh as Liu slams a shot into the net. They've traveled to several competitions together, competing both in singles and in doubles. Jiwen struggled at his first tournaments when he was ranked around 1400 and competing against players with 1800 rankings. Over the past year, he has become more competitive, winning medals and money at his last two tournaments.

For Wu, every training session is focused on the future, where he hopes to have a professional ranking and play for whichever college he attends. To continue improving, Jiwen plays against opponents with much higher rankings than him.

"The professional players at the club, some of them are lot better than me," Wu says. "But I still play them. That's the only way I'll get better."

There's no greater example than Parviz Mojaverian, a former member of the Iranian National Team, who Wu plays his final matches of the day with. Wu goes into the match just hoping to keep up. When he dives across the table to send a shot right next to Mojaverian, both Wu and Liu let out an excited whoop.

"See?" Mojaverian says as he retrieves the ball. "He's got potential."

UNDERSTANDING the RANKINGS

Despite his age, Wu has already moved up in the USATT rankings. Here is how the rankings are conducted:

- **Upsetting higher ranked players gives you more points**
- **Players gain ranking points by winning a match in a tournament**
- **Rankings are controlled by United States of America Table Tennis (USATT)**

Champion
2900-2500 Points

Professional
2500-2000 Points

Novice
2000-1500 Points

Beginner
1500-1300 Points