POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ping Pong
A Film by Hugh Hartford and Anson Hartford

www.pbs.org/pov
Les D’Arcy is a legend in the table tennis world: a seven-time world champ. Within minutes of our meeting him at the European Table Tennis Championships in Croatia, he was quoting Rudyard Kipling’s “If”:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son.

(Rudyard Kipling)

D’Arcy introduced us to 81-year-old Terry Donlon. As we heard about Donlon’s life-long battle with illness and how he uses sport to deal with it, we knew we had a story that could take us not only into sports and aging, but into bigger issues as well.

We knew that we had to film people who would make it into the later stages of the competition, but also that something about their outside lives had to chime with table tennis. So we started by looking at the statistics from previous world championships and getting in touch with the consistently high scorers.

After telephone interviews and meetings, we created profiles of about 30 players who offered something in terms of both sports stories and bigger home-life stories. During the world championships in China, the walls in our hotel rooms were covered with these profiles, and as the competition unfolded we would add comments and re-assess whose stories were panning out. From the original 30, we started filming 14 and from those we chose our final seven players to follow.

For us, Ping Pong was never going to just be about table tennis. A lot of the film is about growing old and coming to terms with mortality, but at the same time the people we meet in the film have more passion and lust for life than many people 50 years their junior.

It sounds odd, but at the beginning we thought we were making a film about what life is like toward the end of our lives, but Ping Pong is much more about living than about dying. It is more about love and friendship than loss and death.

Hugh Hartford and Anson Hartford
Filmmakers, Ping Pong
Seven players with 620 years between them compete in the over 80 division of the World Veterans Table Tennis Championships in China’s Inner Mongolia. British players Terry Donlon, 81, who has been given a week to live, and Les D’Arcy, 91, a weightlifter and poet, are going for the gold. Inge Hermann, 89, from Germany, has used table tennis to paddle her way out of dementia. And Texan Lisa Modlich, 85, is playing on a world stage for the first time. Ping Pong (52 min.) is a wonderfully unusual story of friendship, competitiveness, hope—and sheer human tenacity in the face of aging and mortality.
Ping Pong is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to aging or competition, including The Way We Get By, Sweet Old Song, Golden Threads, Kokoyakyu, Racing Dreams, Age of Champions, True-Hearted Vixens and FRONTLINE: Living Old.
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section
- Nursing homes, assisted living facilities and senior centers
- Sports associations and leagues
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries

Ping Pong is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- aging
- athletics
- competition
- cultural exchange
- friendship
- gerontology
- health
- sports
- table tennis/ping pong

Using this Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Ping Pong to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to persuade others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pbs.org/pov/outreach
World Veterans Table Tennis Championships

The sport of table tennis originated in Britain in the 1880s. London hosted the first official world championship in 1926. Table tennis has been an Olympic sport since 1988.

The first World Veterans Table Tennis Championships took place in 1982 in Gothenburg, Sweden and they have taken place every two years since then. The competition is supervised by the Swaythling Club International and the International Table Tennis Federation.

Each edition of the competition takes place in a different country. Hosts have included Switzerland, Japan, China and Germany. Ping Pong follows the 2010 competition in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China.

The most recent championships took place in 2012 in Stockholm, Sweden with 3,200 players competing. Events included men’s and women’s singles and doubles for players in the following age brackets: 40-49, 50-59, 60-64, 65-69, 70-74, 75-79, 80-84 and 85 and older. To be eligible for the competition, a player must simply have reached 40 years of age during the calendar year when the event takes place.

The oldest competitor in 2012 was Kaptarenko Alexandra, from Russia. He was 100 years old.

The 2014 World Veteran Championships will take place in Auckland, New Zealand.
Physical Activity and Healthy Aging

The positive impact of physical activity on mental health and well-being is widely recognized. A large body of research indicates that physical activity can help manage weight, prevent chronic illness, reduce anxiety and lower the risk for depression. Studies show that even a 30- to 45-minute walk five times a week can boost the body’s immune system. Physical activity has also been shown to change the body’s immune system in ways that may help to protect against some forms of cancer. Harvard Women’s Health Watch reports that exercising regularly may cause a woman’s chances of getting breast cancer to fall 20 to 30 percent, in part because exercise may lower estrogen levels.

In older populations, physical activity has been shown to prevent falls by improving strength, flexibility and balance. A 2012 study published in the journal Neurology also found a link between a higher level of total daily physical activity and

Sources:


International Table Tennis Federation. “Timeline of Table Tennis Milestones.” http://www.ittf.com/_front_page/ittf_full_story2.asp?id=13118&category=menus


Lisa Modlich. Photo courtesy of Hugh Hartford
a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease. The study worked with 716 participants of the Rush Memory and Aging Project, an ongoing longitudinal study on aging which began in 1997. As reported in TIME magazine, a series of brain-function studies published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 2010 support this finding. Scientists found that those who exercised at least three times a week were half as likely to have developed dementia, compared with the people who reported no physical activity.

There is also a growing body of research demonstrating the beneficial cognitive side effects of specific sports and activities, including ping pong and table tennis. These games require hand-eye coordination, rapid eye movements and quick calculations. Alzheimer’s Weekly reports a clear increase in motor skills and cognitive awareness from playing table tennis after a series of preliminary clinical studies in Japan found that table tennis markedly increases the flow of blood to the brain and could possibly even prevent dementia. The same studies noted improved sleeping patterns, better coordination and upper body strength and improved balance among players. In addition, table tennis was found to provide opportunities for patients to socialize, as well as a means for alleviating feelings of isolation and depression.

In 2010, the first (and only) table tennis therapy program in the United States was started through the Sport and Art Educational Foundation. The program is designed for seniors with early stage Alzheimer’s and various forms of dementia. Television personality Mehmet Oz helped popularize the benefits of table tennis when he devoted a segment of his show to ping pong in 2010 and touted it as a “brain sport.”
Sources:

http://www.aan.com/PressRoom/Home/PressRelease/1111


The Dr. Oz Show. “The Secret of Ping Pong.”
http://www.doctoroz.com/videos/secret-ping-pong

Jackson, Michael James. “Table Tennis and Alzheimer’s?” USA Table Tennis Magazine, January/February 2012.

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704350304574638331243027174.html


http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1956619,00.html

Sport and Art Educational Foundation. “SAEF Table Tennis Therapy Program.”
http://saef.us/alzheimers.html

Did You Know?

Table tennis is the world’s most popular racquet sport.  
(Killerspin Table Tennis http://www.killerspin.com/spin-info-general)

The earliest games of ping pong were played in England in the 1880s.  
The game was an adaptation of lawn tennis and was played on dining  
room tables in parlors.  
(A Comprehensive History of Table Tennis, The ITFF Museum  
http://www.ittf.com/museum/history.html)

The American game and toy manufacturer Parker Brothers acquired  
the American rights to the name “ping pong.”  
(A Comprehensive History of Table Tennis, The ITFF Museum  
http://www.ittf.com/museum/history.html)

In England in the early 1890s, alternative names for table tennis  
included parlour tennis, film-flam and whiff whaff.  
(Tim Harris, Sport: Almost Everything You Ever Wanted to Know, Random House, 2009)

Ping pong was originally played with a cork ball, but the ball bounced  
so badly that eventually a celluloid ball came to be used in its place.  
(Tim Harris, Sport: Almost Everything You Ever Wanted to Know, Random House, 2009)

20 million Americans play recreational table tennis each year  
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324634304578535532463401830.html)

Ping Pong was banned in the Soviet Union from 1930 to 1950 because  
the sport was believed to be harmful to the eyes.  
(TimeOut Table Tennis Guide – London 2012 Olympic Games  

The world’s top table tennis players can hit the ball at speeds of more  
than 100 miles per hour.  
(Grimsby Telegraph http://www.thisisgrimsby.co.uk/ball-reach-speeds-100mph/story- 
18695093-detail/story.html)

The first Olympics to feature table tennis as an official sport were the  
1988 summer games in Seoul, South Korea.  
(Grimsby Telegraph http://www.thisisgrimsby.co.uk/ball-reach-speeds-100mph/story- 
18695093-detail/story.html)
Selected Athletes Featured in Ping Pong

British player Les D’Arcy, 89, is Terry’s doubles partner. Les is a renowned advocate for the elderly, known for his determined—some would say fanatical—pursuit of activities such as weightlifting, triathlon and shot-put.

Fellow Brit Terry Donlon is 81 and has cancer. He plays wearing a nebulizer for shortness of breath, earning him a reputation as a “walking miracle.” Now, he’s been given one week to live.

Swede Rune Forsberg, 85, an archrival of Les, sees the 2010 competition as his last chance for gold.
**Lisa Modlich** of Houston, a relative newcomer at 85, has led an exciting life. She was raised in an aristocratic Viennese family and fought in the French Resistance before emigrating to the U.S. She is now married to Joachim, 25 years her junior, and is one of the game's fiercest competitors.

**Ursula Bihl.** 89, of Germany, won the world championship three years earlier and almost gave up on going to the 2010 championship.

German **Inge Hermann.** 89, ended up in the dementia ward of a nursing home after her husband’s death 15 years earlier. Introduced to table tennis as therapy, she literally paddled her way back to physical and mental wellbeing, and today she manages the nursing home and teaches computer science classes. In *Ping Pong*, she’s going to her first international competition.

**Dorothy DeLow** of Australia may not be the best player, but she’s a legend in her own right. At 100, she is the game’s oldest competitive player.
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask him or her?
- What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that moved you. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling?
**Athletes**

In a newspaper story, Ursula Bihl suggests that young people will be surprised by her athletic success. Why would young people be surprised? How do the accomplishments of the athletes in the film challenge stereotypes of older people? In what ways did they challenge or affirm your own ideas about senior citizens?

Les D’Arcy says, “Life’s battles don’t always go to the stronger or fitter man. But sooner or later, the man that wins is the man who thinks he can.” How does attitude contribute to the success of the athletes we meet in the film?

Lisa Modlich’s husband, Joachim, describes her by saying, “I think the main force that drives Lisa is competition.” She acknowledges, “In school I always had to be number one. I like it.” How is Modlich like or unlike the competitive people you know? What are the benefits and drawbacks of being extremely competitive?

What did you notice about the training regimens used by these athletes? How did they prepare for competition? How are these athletes different from and similar to other athletes?

In your opinion, what differentiates an athlete from a recreational player?

Lisa Modlich describes her playing style: “It’s not how hard you play, it’s where you put it.” How might strategy change as physical capacity diminishes?

Terry Donlon says, “I think your mind can cure a lot of your body.” Commenting on a match in which he struggled, he says, “This is where the mind takes over. You ignore the pain. You just keep doing it. Ignore it. Try and think of something else and not what’s happening in your arm.” How does athletic competition sharpen an athlete’s mind and how do athletes use the power of their minds to sharpen their competitive edge?

The world championship involves competitors from around the globe. What is it about athletics that opens up opportunities for cultural exchange and global cooperation, even in circumstances where politics fail?
Health
Lisa Modlich says that she gets a high after playing: “My endorphins really go berserk after a good game.” What did you learn from the film about healthy aging and the potential benefits of athletic competition?
Inge Hermann began playing table tennis in a nursing home to help her recover from a stroke. Good health is often cited as a prerequisite for athletic participation, but what about the opposite? What is the potential healing power of sports?

Legacy
After a loss, Les D’Arcy says that table tennis is a game “that one can do to a ripe old age. But you wonder, is it worth the effort? Can you be doing something more constructive?” Do you think the game is worth the effort expended by the people we see in the film? What do they gain from the experience?

D’Arcy summarizes a poem, saying, “So we’ve got to tell people nice things whilst they’re around and not wait until they’re dead.” What “nice things” haven’t you told the people in your life? When do you think would be a good time to share your thoughts with them?
D’Arcy enjoys reciting verse. What sayings or poems are your favorites?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Taking Action

• Use a screening of the film to kick off a friendly ping pong tournament in a local assisted living or senior citizen community center.

• Commit to helping one elder in your family or community live a healthier life by taking regular walks with him or her, preparing healthy meals with or for him or her and scheduling activities involving physical movement. Consider developing a “buddy system” within your organization, religious group (such as members of a church, synagogue or mosque) or neighborhood to pair an older person with a younger person.

• Interview local senior athletes and share their stories via local media and/or online outlets such as blogs or video sharing sites.
RESOURCES

FILMMAKER WEBSITE

PING PONG
http://pingpongfilm.co.uk
In addition to reviews and information about the film and filmmakers, the site includes exercise activity posters and resources to help you organize an event.

THE BRITDOC FOUNDATION
http://britdoc.org
A not-for-profit film foundation in the UK, BRITDOC conducted an exemplary outreach campaign for Ping Pong and produced a free lesson plan to accompany the film. The lesson plan can be accessed on the Doc Academy website (https://docacademy.org/films/2/ping-pong/), a site conceived by BritDoc and designed by and for teachers to provide lesson plans for non-fiction films.

Original Online Content on POV

To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The Ping Pong website—www.pbs.org/pov/PingPong—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with the filmmakers; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.

What’s Your POV?
Share your thoughts about Ping Pong by posting a comment at http://www.pbs.org/pov/PingPong
Active Aging

AGE OF CHAMPIONS
http://ageofchampions.org/health/
The website for this documentary offers general information on healthy aging for seniors and becoming an athlete after age 50.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED PERSONS
www.aarp.org/
This membership and advocacy organization for Americans 50 and older provides a wide range of resources and information related to health and active aging.

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION: HEALTHY AGING
www.cdc.gov/aging/
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides information on healthy aging and related issues and services.

FRONTLINE: LIVING OLD
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/livingold/
The website for this FRONTLINE series features stories of diverse elders and their families as they face a range of life (and death) choices.

Athletic Competition

NATIONAL SENIOR GAMES ASSOCIATION
www.nsga.com
In addition to information about athletic competitions for athletes over age 50, this site includes health and fitness resources and recommendations.

TEAM USA TABLE TENNIS
www.teamusa.org/USA-Table-Tennis/
The website of the official sanctioning organization for competitive ping pong in the United States includes information about clubs, events, rules and player rankings. The U.K. Veterans Table Tennis Society, www.vetts.org.uk/, is a similar organization for players over 40. There are also Veterans Table Tennis associations in Australia, Sweden and New Zealand (where the 2014 World Veterans Table Tennis Championships will be held).

SPIN GALACTIC
http://newyork.spingalactic.com/
SPiN Galactic is a network of ping-pong night clubs where anyone can play ping pong, eat, drink, socialize, and host events. Owned and created by Franck Rarahinosy, Andrew Gordon, Jonathan Bricklin and Academy Award-winning actress Susan Sarandon, SPiN can be found in New York, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Toronto and Dubai.

Ping Pong Therapy

SPORT AND ART EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION: TABLE TENNIS THERAPY PROGRAM
http://saef.us/alzheimers.html
The first and only U.S. table tennis therapy program is located in Los Angeles, California and is designed for seniors with early stage Alzheimer’s and various forms of dementia.
HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order Ping Pong for home or educational use, please visit http://pingpongfilm.co.uk/watch

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 26th season on PBS in 2013, the award-winning POV is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. POV has brought more than 365 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide. POV films have won every major film and broadcasting award, including 32 Emmys, 15 George Foster Peabody Awards, 10 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards® and the Prix Italia. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today’s most pressing social issues. Visit www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

POV’s award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The POV Blog is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 600 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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American Documentary, Inc. www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying, and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream-media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online, and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

You can follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.

Front cover: Les D’arcy.
Photo courtesy of Hugh Hartford

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