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Ping pong greats take on all comers

Locals pay \$5 to battle world-class players at Nixon library.

By **MICHAEL MELLO**
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YORBA LINDA – On one side of the table Jessica Cheung planted herself in an earnest stance. On the other side stood Song Shichao, a ping pong player from China.

Undaunted, Cheung played hard, never losing her steely glare until after her five-minute match.

"We weren't keeping score, but I got beat up so bad," the 16-year-old Rowland Heights resident said.

But, she acknowledged, she got pummeled — figuratively — by a world champion, "so that makes it okay."

Cheung was one of dozens of amateur players who lined up and paid \$5 to take on world-ranked ping pong players from the U.S. and China at the Nixon Presidential Library & Museum on Wednesday.

They're in Yorba Linda this week for a second day of exhibitions leading up to Thursday's rematch of the classic early 1970s "Ping Pong Diplomacy" games. The money raised was to help cover expenses.

In 1971, the United States national table tennis team became the first Americans invited to set foot on Chinese soil since the nation turned Communist in 1949. The 1971 trip, and another in 1972, came to be known as Ping Pong Diplomacy as the trips helped pave the softer relations between the U.S. and China sought by then-President Richard M. Nixon.

On Wednesday, politics were not a part of the program, or even a shadow to the event.

Instead, the standing-room-only crowd of nearly 200 "oohed" and "aahed" during a demonstration, as the players slapped ping pong balls from one end of the table to another with the same calm ease with which most people brush their teeth.

Then the floor opened up to challengers, and the line soon stretched halfway around the large hall.

"I got two whole points," said Evan Rovin, 18, after he challenged U.S. player and Olympian Mark Hazinski. "If I'd warmed up a little, I could've gotten three. I could tell he was holding back, but it was fun."

Hazinski, when asked whether he was indeed holding back, answered only with a muted smile.

"It's been fun," he said. "There are a few that have been pretty good."

Tustin resident Tom Miller, 50, was one of the first in line and took on Chinese player and world champion Zhang Lei.

"The guy's good," Miller said. "I got a couple of points, but...."

Miller is no stranger to ping pong, a pastime he calls "something of a family sport. When I was in junior high, I had to play my father to get \$20 to go out."

But Miller admitted his experience on Wednesday was at a different level: "The spin those guys put on the ball is amazing."

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