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Table tennis: It's more than just ping pong at UCF

Keira Gilmore

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Wesley Underwood, junior computer science major, returns a serve with a strong forehand against USF.

Keira Gilmore

Knights Table Tennis Club hosted its National Collegiate Table Tennis Association Divisional tournament on Saturday at the UCF Recreation and Wellness Center.

The UCF team hosted and competed against teams from UF, USF, FIU, FSU and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical in the Northern Florida Divisional tournament.

The top two finalists would move on to compete in the NCTTA South Regional tournament held

in Texas.

Knights Table Tennis Club has not always been as big as it is now. It started as a small club twenty years ago, jumping from being one of the smallest sports clubs to now having around 100 members.

Oswaldo Pelaez, junior computer science major, is president of the table tennis club this year.

Pelaez has been on the team for three years and is now one of the top players. He currently has a 2,000 ranking in table tennis after starting at 1,800. The highest pro national ranking is 2,600, making him one of the top players on the team this year. Pelaez said he enjoys playing in tournaments with the team and the excitement of competing.

After gaining more members, popularity and money from sponsors, the team was able to move out of the group exercise studio and onto the basketball courts at the Recreation and Wellness Center last semester.

“We were there, in the exercise studio before, in such a small space, we could barely fit everything,” Pelaez said.

When more members continued to join, sponsorships increased, more space was offered and more fundraising occurred. As a team, they have been able to do so much more, such as hosting social events and teaming up with other sports clubs to host events, like a Wii Table Tennis night with Esports at UCF.

The team also managed to raise enough money this year to receive new jerseys, new equipment and new tables.

Jack Steinberg, junior hospitality major, is the Knights Table Tennis social media coordinator, event coordinator and fundraising chair.

“It’s really just the community itself, they are the real sponsors,” Steinberg said.

Steinberg said that without the community of local supporters, players and loyal alumni, they wouldn’t be where they are now.

Leo Aranibar, sophomore business economics major, is a member of the Knights Table Tennis A Team.

"Being part of the team is a way of feeling that I'm a part of UCF," Aranibar said.

Aranibar said he enjoys playing table tennis and competing because it reminds him of his home country, Bolivia, and it is a way for him to balance his classes and life outside of UCF.

UCF alumnus Jermaine Bennett, who graduated in 2007 with bachelor's degrees in business and management information systems, was a co-founder of the Table Tennis Club twenty years ago. Currently, he is the team's head coach and said he enjoys seeing the growth of the team over the years. He also helps keep them motivated and to always believe in themselves during tournaments.

"If they can concentrate and just play, they can achieve wonders," Bennett said.

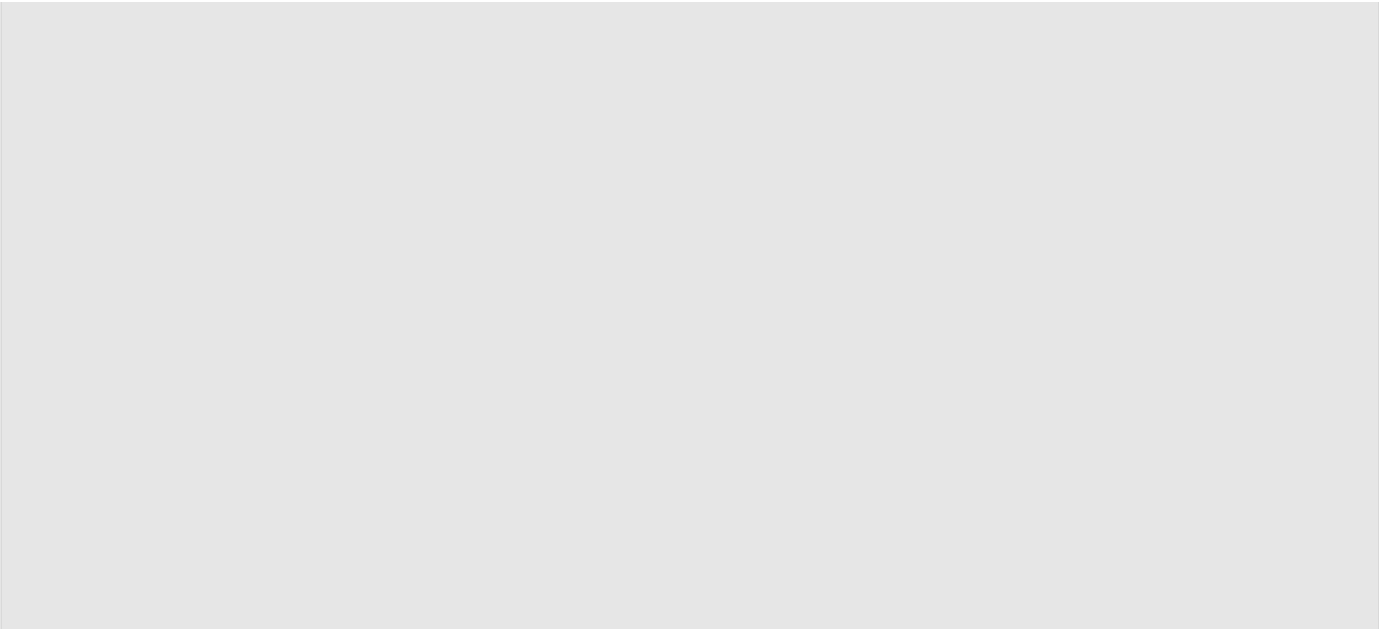
In the first two rounds, UCF started off strong, playing against FIU and FSU, defeating FIU 3-1 and FSU 4-0.

In the third round the team played against UF, one of the top competitors. After tying the match 2-2, the team played doubles as a tiebreaker for the fifth match, sadly losing a hard-fought game, leaving the score 2-3.

By the final round of the tournament, it came down to USF and UCF battling it out for the final spot to move on to regionals. UCF won, beating USF 3-1, and clinched their spot in the next regional tournament.

"This isn't even pressure to me, it's just excitement," Pelaez said.





UCF Table Tennis Club competes in NCTTA spring tournament
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