

Table tennis for life

by Brandon Sneed



Members of the Jerry Powder Table Tennis Club include sharks Susan Taranto and Doris Biggerstaff. Concentrating on the game, and the healthy workout, help the seniors stay young and cope with illness.

photo by Brandon Sneed

The sound of bouncing plastic echoes a bit around the game room at the New Hanover County Senior Center. People are playing table tennis. Specifically, senior citizens are playing – members of the Jerry Powder Table Tennis Club.

Four seniors play together at one table. At another, Susan Taranto faces a machine. It shoots balls at her. She returns them, concentrating on what she learned at a lesson in Raleigh. Taranto joined the club around a year ago. On her way to Durham one week in January she stopped in Raleigh. The lesson lasted an hour, then she was back in the car, en route to her ulti-

mate destination: Duke, for an appointment with her oncologist. She has stage 4 breast cancer.

Life gets complicated with age. Table tennis had a way of simplifying things, at least for a little while. “It’s a fun distraction,” says Taranto, who is 64.

Now, a couple weeks later, she’s here, practicing. She loves this time. She loves playing, but just recently started, so she’s not as good as others in the club. So for an hour two or three days a week, she’s out here, firing shots, focused on nothing but returning serves from a machine.

Right now she doesn't have cancer or the bills for treatment (one pill a day at \$15 a pill). Nothing exists except those balls, this table, that paddle.

As she hits, another woman yells at her. "Don't just poke at it!" Doris Biggerstaff yells. "Stroke it!"

Biggerstaff is 86. She, too, once faced cancer. Ailments are just part of age's complications. They rob some women of life before life's meant to leave. Biggerstaff, though, still has life despite being diagnosed with lung cancer in 2004. Table tennis has a lot to do with that. It saved her arms once.

She had a lump surgically removed from her left lobe. Surgeons cut under her arms to get it. Five weeks later she was back here, playing with her doubles partner Dub Freswater as usual. At first it hurt, but she kept playing. She got sore, but she kept coming.

When Biggerstaff was a young woman, she went to USO dances. You can imagine it if you meet her. She's outgoing, vivacious and even a little flirtatious. "I loved to go dance with them young fellas," she says, smiling. Reminiscing. Remembering being young.

One night she discovered a pingpong table in the back and started playing. She got good. Then she played instead of dancing. Now, here, she's the same girl.

"I don't think I would have survived if not for this," she says.

Her doctor said the game let her maintain full mobility in her arms. Every check-up, he said they should play some day. After her last visit this past December, he declared her cancer-free. She pulled out her paddle. "Then let's go have our game," she said.

"No way I'm playing you," he said. "You'd beat me so bad. I don't want you showing me up."

Biggerstaff has won 27 Senior Games medals. She's a reason Taranto practices against a machine instead of others in the club. "I can't play with these folks yet," Taranto says. They chuckle. There's a half-

dozen here at the center right now. "They're all sharks."

One thing about sharks: they only live as long as they're moving.

It was around Thanksgiving 2008 when Taranto was diagnosed. She was traumatized. One night, she wrote a poem about it. "It was my last waking thought and my first thought each morning," she wrote.

She didn't wallow in sorrow, though. Instead, she trained. She took up table tennis. Now she's out here getting coached by one of the club's best members.

"I love the challenge of learning," Taranto says. That's why she went to Raleigh. "You have to pay attention to your balance and your feet and your technique," she says. "Breast cancer – there's no room for it at that time." Her cancer shrunk over the past six months.

"People say your life has to be better after you're diagnosed than before," Taranto says. "And my life is better."

Getting older doesn't always mean getting old. Taranto and Biggerstaff and some of the people they play with have dealt with cancer and undergone too many surgeries to remember. But they're good. They're alive in here. Playing takes them away from their worries; it also takes them away in time.

They are young again. ✦

TOP: Susan Taranto practices against a machine.

BELOW: Doris Biggerstaff returns a volley. Both women have faced cancer and turned to table tennis to keep active and centered.

photos by Brandon Sneed

