



The veteran ping - pong champions

by Patrick Barkham

Whiff-whaff, wham! The table tennis ball swerves in the air and then rapidly speeds off in the wrong direction when I lunge at it with my bat. Ping-pong, plop. This time, my attempted return skates into the net. I am a reasonably fit 37 year old and I'm sweating. There's not a bead of perspiration on my opponent, Terry Donlon, 83. Donlon had his prostate removed in 1996, his right kidney extracted eight months later and now has terminal bone and lung cancer. His doctors predicted he would be dead by now and he is thrashing me.

'He was being magnanimous there,' nods Les D'Arcy, 91, after Donlon wins our match. D'Arcy then shows me how they would serve in a competitive game. He has chronic pain from his sciatic nerve, desperately needs a knee replacement, and has aggravated his skin cancer by swimming to keep fit, but is competing at the 16th World Veteran Championships in Sweden. D'Arcy has a world title to defend; so does Donlon.

The old friends are two of eight veteran table-tennis players who star in a new documentary,

Ping Pong, which follows the course of the previous world championships, held in China in 2010. *Ping Pong* is being shown at special screenings in care homes around Britain but it's inspirational for people of any age.

Does competitiveness drive them on? D'Arcy recalls the time Donlon was suffering from malaria and swiftly went two games down to a brutally aggressive Yorkshireman (is there any other kind?) before coming back to win the match 3-2. Donlon, said D'Arcy, 'was willing to drop dead to win that match and the other guy was willing to commit murder'.

It may be a cliché but it is striking how positive D'Arcy and Donlon are about their ailments. 'Old age,' muses D'Arcy, 'makes you become a research scientist, looking for the panacea which will enlarge your lifespan. One's always optimistic that you can find the Holy Grail.' He says he will keep playing table tennis, whatever the state of his knee. Perhaps in an admission that he is slowing down, he has also taken up chess—but he plays on a giant board with life-size figures so at least he is getting some exercise, heaving pawns about. 'What options are there left?' he laughs. 'Origami? Ludo?'

Patrick Barkham takes on Les D'Arcy

1. In the first paragraph, the writer includes references to Terry Donlon's age and health problems in order to
 - (A) justify why he was willing to let Donlon win the game.
 - (B) evoke the reader's sympathy for Donlon.
 - (C) reinforce Donlon's belief that elderly people need exercise.
 - (D) emphasise Donlon's remarkable level of fitness.

2. Which quotation suggests that Donlon had deliberately modified his game against the writer?
 - (A) 'There's not a bead of perspiration on my opponent'
 - (B) 'he is thrashing me'
 - (C) 'D'Arcy then shows me how they would serve in a competitive game.'
 - (D) 'D'Arcy has a world title to defend'

3. The writer says that the documentary *Ping Pong* is 'inspirational for people of any age' because
 - (A) it shows both elderly people and young people playing table tennis.
 - (B) it conveys the theme of perseverance.
 - (C) it includes footage of table tennis competitions.
 - (D) it highlights the fierce rivalry between D'Arcy and Donlon.

4. In the quotation 'It may be a cliché', the word 'It' refers to
 - (A) the hope that a cure will be found for Donlon's and D'Arcy's health problems.
 - (B) the response of Donlon and D'Arcy toward their health problems.
 - (C) the inevitability that poor health and old age go hand in hand.
 - (D) the importance of continuing to experiment with a range of cures.

5. What is the main purpose of the dash in the last paragraph?
 - (A) to indicate qualifying details follow
 - (B) to signify the writer's concern about an idea
 - (C) to signal that previous information is unverified
 - (D) to refer to an alternative point of view

6. Which description of Donlon and D'Arcy would the writer agree with?
 - (A) They are two men who have devoted their lives to promoting their sport.
 - (B) They are two elderly men who are no longer able to play competitive sport.
 - (C) They are two old men who are only happy when playing table tennis.
 - (D) They are two men who enjoy their lives to the full.