

# KidsPost

## Setting the table for an Olympic bid

**B**ehind the heavy brown door that opens into the Maryland Table Tennis Center, balls ping, ping, pop and pong, hair flies, sneakers squeak and laughter echoes off the walls. Obviously to the noise, Crystal Wang, 13, finishes her homework in a corner, and then heads over to a blue table. She picks up a rubber-coated paddle, bends her knees, leans into her toes and looks into her opponent's eyes. She shifts her weight, pulls back her arm and delivers a serve with a feather-light touch.

In a flash, 14-year-old Derek Nie responds from the other side of the net, returning the spin-

ning ball.

Crystal and Derek are no casual players. They are two of the most promising American teenagers in competitive table tennis.

The sport, also known as Ping-Pong, is like tennis, but it's played indoors on a table divided by a short net. Playing involves a lot of small moves and heart-pounding footwork.

"It feels like a rush," Derek says.

Crystal, from Boyds, and Derek, from North Potomac, train at the Gaithersburg center almost every day. Derek started playing at age 7, after his older brother got into the sport. Crystal's grandparents, both of whom



PLAYER PHOTOS: NICK GAIL FOR THE WASHINGTON POST; PUZZLES: STOCKPHOTO



Derek Nie, 14, and Crystal Wang, 13, practice at the Maryland Table Tennis Center in Gaithersburg. The teenagers hope to represent the United States at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Brazil.



played table tennis, introduced her to it at age 5.

"It's amazing how Crystal and Derek show up at the club ready to play, day after day, week after week, never moping around or complaining and always striving to get better," coach Larry Hodges says. "They are both also great students. Somehow they balance it all."

Derek juggles the demands of eighth grade at Robert Frost Middle School, his math team and practicing violin. Crystal, who Hodges says is one of the best female table tennis players of her age in U.S. history, practices every day and still manages to excel in the magnet program at Roberto Clemente Middle School. She competes all over the world, in such places as Japan,

Canada, India, China and Austria. Every summer, she travels to China to train.

In 2014, Crystal became the youngest person ever to make the USA National Women's Team and the youngest to win the under-23 women's singles competition at the USA National Table Tennis Championships held in December in Las Vegas.

Last year, Derek won his age group at the U.S. Open in Las Vegas. He competes in tournaments around the United States. These days, both players are preparing to compete in the Olympic trials next year.

"My dream is to make the Olympic team," says Crystal, who also hopes that table tennis will help her get into a good college. She plans to study medicine.

Their successes have been mixed with challenges. In March, Crystal had a big loss. "I was too nervous in my mental game," she says. "I did really bad, but I just tried to learn from the experience."

But the challenges provide opportunities to improve in ways outside of their sport. Like how Derek no longer feels that nervous during oral presentations for his English class. "At least," he says, "I'm less nervous compared to how I feel at a big tournament."

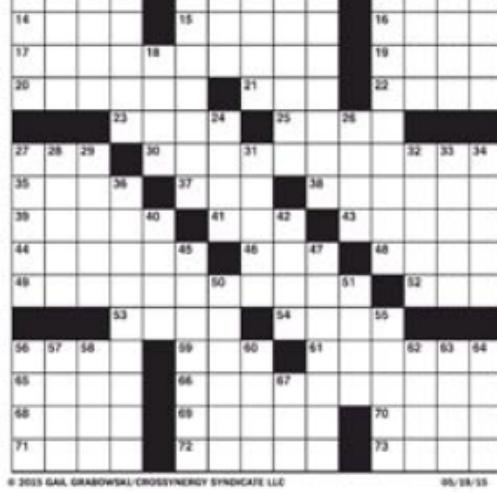
And they do have fun along the way. Crystal says she loves making new friends at tournaments. "And," Derek adds with a laugh, "she really likes to win."

—KAREN JACOBI  
Kjacobi@washpost.com

### CROSSSYNERGY CROSSWORD "BACKBREAKING WORK"

#### ACROSS

- Squealers in pens
- Silicon Valley car company
- Not punctual
- Greenside golf shot
- Tired snacks
- Like Arizona's typical climate
- CD extra
- Sign of hunger
- Ancient Athens rival
- Boxing ref's call
- Cyberbudder's site
- Lofty
- Rotten to the core
- "Wait a \_\_\_!"
- Flat holder of multiple pills, often
- Hoofbeat sound
- Word of support
- Commands
- Museum artifact
- Letters from your folks?
- Sarcastic
- Joins forces
- Fleece source
- Appear
- Framework for securing two-wheeler
- Take advantage of
- Lowly laborer
- River through Belgium
- \_\_\_ bean
- Org. with Eagles
- Cause of a rebellious 1773 event in Boston Harbor
- State firmly
- Rustic-looking bag made with jute
- Windshield glass cleaner
- Car Nation members
- Smartphone display
- Whirling water



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#### DOWN

- EPA-banned chemicals
- Chain with links
- Lollobrigida of film
- Sudden burst
- 100 percent
- Shank the ball, e.g.
- Parts part
- Small keepsake holder
- Invite to one's house
- They're stuck through jacket flaps
- Part of UAE
- Turner who sang "Let's Stay Together"
- Keyed up
- Rough guess
- Created fiction?
- Well-prepared
- They're drawn in bars
- Portfolio holdings, for short
- Attack baked-on grease, say
- Nicholas Gage memoir
- Infant's woe
- More balanced
- Cherbourg ciao
- Relinquishes
- legally
- Event that's a crying shame?
- Traveling
- Seventh heaven
- Make certain
- Hang on to
- Kraslasse disciple
- Kismet
- All fired up
- Sell
- Solo delivery
- It helps a cat keep its balance
- High point
- Classic Jags
- Spearheaded
- YOGA POSITION
- UMP NIL BASRA
- GOING APE PEALLED
- LMNO OBS MOLE
- YEAH SO BIGAPPLE
- COOKIE MMD SAP
- GROWING APART
- EEL NKG BOLUP
- SPAWN MEGAPRIZE
- TODIE ATEM EMIT
- STAIR NSEC DOSE

#### MONDAY'S CROSSSYNERGY SOLUTION "MIND THE GAP"



### BOOK WORLD

## Saul Bellow gets measured treatment in exhaustive first volume of his life

BY STEVEN MOORE

Saul Bellow would have turned 100 this June, but the Nobel Prize-winning author, who died in 2005, is experiencing a kind of literary rebirth. Last month a collection of his essays was published, and now comes the engaging first volume of a two-part biography by Zachary Leader, a London-based literary critic.

Bellow has been the subject of several reminiscences and biographies, most notably one by James Atlas published in 2000, which struck some readers as resentful and overly critical. Leader offers a considerably longer, more straightforward account, with no particular agenda, thesis or as to grind, stuffed to the rafters with the results of his prodigious research. He provides all the facts, to be interpreted as you like — a welcome alternative to overly psychoanalytical, theory-driven biographies.

Bellow led an archetypal novelist's life; he was destined from an early age to become a writer. He was born in Canada into an immigrant Russian Jewish family — "crowded, tense, loving, fractious" — and worked dozens of hard-scrabble jobs as a teenager in Chicago. He read voraciously and argued vehemently with other well-read kids his age, wrote hundreds of pages of fiction and traveled widely. After publishing two respectable but mediocre-selling novels in the 1940s, he broke through in 1953, stylistically and commercially, with "The Adventures of Augie March," and continued to produce well-regarded novels up to "Herzog" in 1964, which is where this first volume ends.

As Leader points out, Bellow was highly autobiographical novelist, and in the early part of the biography he connects nearly every real-life incident to its reference in Bellow's fiction — unpublished and published. For example, at age 8, Bellow suffered an appendicitis attack and spent months recovering from it and other complications. Leader follows Bellow's original three-page account with quotations

from two novels and three unfinished works tracking all the uses Bellow made of the experience.

Young Saul's concern for his mother is followed by every reference to mothers in Bellow's works. In nearly every instance, Bellow adjusted the facts to fit his artistic needs, a point not always appreciated by acquaintances who saw themselves depicted in his art.

Leader's thoroughness extends to those acquaintances. As each new person enters Bellow's life, a mini-biography is provided, and if they were writers — as many of them were —

Leader gives accounts of their works, too. Bellow's first three wives also receive full, evenhanded treatment. The amount of detail here is staggering. In addition to telling Bellow's story, Leader succinctly summarizes all the cultural upheavals surrounding him in those heady days. (The biography doubles as a primer on the intellectual climate of the times.) But the details never become too dense or overwhelming, thanks largely to Leader's clear, brisk style.

I was surprised to learn how erudite Bellow was from high school onward, how much teaching he did in his early days — in Europe as well as in America — how good a musician he was, and how frequently Bellow was called upon, from Augie onward, to advise corporations, sit on boards and committees, and interact with corporate types. This speaks to how seriously novelists were taken in the 1950s and 1960s, when they enjoyed a cultural cachet unthinkable today. (I can't imagine any corporation asking, say, Jonathan Franzen or William T. Vollmann to advise it

or join its board.)

Respectful but not hagiographic, Leader is not afraid to point out occasional flaws in Bellow's character and in his writing: violations in point of view, uncontrolled language (especially "Augie"), and his over-reliance on spontaneity. He quotes Philip Roth on the latter point: "Usually about half way through the book the original impulse weakens and then he gets a mess in the middle." Bellow admitted this himself when writing "Herzog": "As sometimes happens by the hundred page, my lack of planning, or the subconscious cunning, catch up with me," concluding checkily in a letter to Richard Stern, "God will provide. Consider the lilies of the field — do they write books?"

Leader covers Bellow's relationships with fellow Jewish American writers such as Roth and Bernard Malamud, but I would have liked to see more on what he thought of some other novelists who emerged during that time. I was surprised at how many quotations from Bellow's work sounded like Jack Kerouac, yet he is mentioned (along with J.D. Salinger and William Burroughs) only as the possessor of a pseudoscientific object known as an ergone box. Nor does Leader share Bellow's opinion of others who worked the artist side of the street in the 1950s and early 1960s (John Hawkes, William Godwin, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon), although a few of them appeared in a short-lived magazine called "The Noble Savage" he co-edited from 1960 to 1962.

Perhaps they'll turn up in Volume 2 — all the more reason to anticipate the conclusion of what will surely become the standard biography of Bellow for years to come.

booknotes@washpost.com

Moore is a literary critic whose latest book is "William Godwin." For more books coverage, go to [washingtonpost.com/books](http://washingtonpost.com/books).

On Tuesday at 7 p.m., Zachary Leader will be at Politics & Prose Bookstore, 5015 Connecticut Ave. NW.

**CHIP SAYS** The longest table tennis rally was held in London on March 23, 2014, between father-and-son duo Daniel and Peter Lee. It lasted 8 hours, 40 minutes and 5 seconds.



**TODAY** Cloudy, with a shower or thunderstorm. **HIGH** 88 **LOW** 62

ILLUSTRATION BY CATHERINE LANDIGAN, STYLING BY KELLY MELVILLE



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