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State back atop foos pyramid

2003-07-27

By Francisco Ojeda

The Oklahoman

Walking into a foosball tournament, Rex Bennett no longer fears looking around. He hears and sees what he likes.

The crack of the ball smashing against the goal, players moving side to side in anticipation and the fluid movement of the ball back and forth.

And he enjoys the sight of lots of people playing.

"It's a big joy playing foosball, and I'm glad that so many people enjoy the game," said Bennett, a vendor, promoter and tournament director.

"We have an outlet (in Oklahoma) to compete. It's somewhat like it used to be.

"But it can always get better."

Bennett has high goals for the sport, trying to make Oklahoma one of the most popular places to play foosball in the country and producing the best players in the world.

Those goals are lofty, but they were reality 10 years ago.

"Oklahoma was considered a major state to play," said Kathy Richey, who won a world championship in doubles in 1998. "Everybody came. But it has faded off, it's not the same.

"But it's making a comeback."

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The state produced about 12 world champions and nearly 20 world championships since the late '80s. In the mid-'90s, six of the top 20 ranked women in the country resided in Oklahoma.

"It got real big; we were a main stop in the national pro tour and the big tournaments," Link Pendley said. "Oklahoma was the second-best-represented state behind Texas. It produced great players."

Pendley was a major reason for the success. He owned Starbucks in Moore, a game room that featured weekly local and national foosball tournaments. Hundreds, even thousands of players competed for purses of thousands of dollars. There also were foosball leagues. Players responded in the competitive environment.

Pendley said the key was that the tournaments were available for everybody, which helped develop youngsters, such as Tommy Adkisson of Oklahoma City, who won four world championships and was ranked No. 1 in the country for three years in the late '90s.

But at the height, Pendley decided to take a job late in 1996 with a larger company, Valley Recreation Products in Michigan. His absence left a void in the state.

"It created a vacuum," Bennett said. "Large tournaments all disappeared. Oklahoma City and the state floundered. Players had no avenue to play. Without (Pendley), it plummeted for a while and no one was there. There's not a high profit for vendors and promoters unless you own your own location."

The big tournaments quickly decreased, and the local tournaments were dispersed around the state. Those quickly disappeared because many of the tournaments were poorly run.

The local players either chose to play out of state competitions or slowly stopped playing.

"I wish it didn't happen," Pendley said of the drop-off of tournaments in the state. "There was nobody ready to step into my shoes."

What once was a foosball haven turned into a struggling state to attract players and tournaments. With less competition, the number of champions dwindled with one Oklahoman winning a world championship in the previous four years.

Bennett, who has played foosball for nine years, got frustrated with the lack of participation in local tournaments and decided to step in. He was a vice president of a property management company, but decided to go back to school. Already having student loans, he asked friends and family to lend him money to purchase several foosball tables.

"The opportunity showed itself to get tables," Bennett said. "Not many people would do it, but the lack of money is not important. I did it for the love of the game and help get more involvement."

He began setting up tournaments. He constructed a Web site, sought out locations to have events and sent out monthly fliers spreading the word. That began to attract local players and out-of- towners.

Kyle Puit of Oklahoma City began promoting tournaments as well, although they were a bit smaller.

"Without Rex and me, there wouldn't be a whole bunch of people interested in jumping in to take over this thing," Puit said. "We were keeping it alive early on.

"Players want to see your face here, who is actually going to run tournament and do it well."

Another boost is the resurgence of Adkisson on the pro tour. Adkisson was in prison for nearly four years for possession of illegal drugs and got out in December.

Richey said Adkisson's personality, his passion and his talent for the game inspired people watching him. When he went away, some of the reputation of the game in the state did, too.

"I know me being here helps people become more interested," said Adkisson, who became the youngest player to win a doubles and singles championship in the same year in 1993 at age 18. "I felt a little responsible for the interest going down. But now we are getting more tournaments and competition and I want to be a part of that."

The Oklahoma State Foosball Championship is in October, and there are seven Oklahoma players ranked in the top 100 nationally.

"I can tell now that Oklahoma is back because when I'm at the national tournaments, I'm not only seeing the other great players from the state, I'm seeing new young players," Pendley said. "That's the key. There's a professionalism to the sport in Oklahoma and everybody has responded."

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