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THE GODFATHER OF TABLE HOCKEY

There's a secret society afoot in suburban Winnipeg. The man who runs it will play anyone – and he's more than happy welcoming all newcomers to one of the oldest offshoots of the good ol' hockey game **BY JARED CLINTON**

IF YOU COUNT YOURSELF among those with fond childhood memories of hunching over a table-hockey game or have ever dug around your pockets for your last few quarters and plugged them into a local watering hole's

bubble-hockey machine, it's with great pleasure we inform you that heaven, indeed, is a place on Earth. It's located on a sleepy suburban-Winnipeg street, tucked down a flight of stairs, behind a literal curtain of jerseys and into a bustling basement. Here lies what is

affectionately known by the members of the Winnipeg Table Hockey League as WTHL Place.

But it may as well be called The House That Sal Capizzi Built.

It's here Capizzi has assembled not just the WTHL's home base but a shrine to and veritable museum of table hockey. Games from Canada, the U.S. and Europe are stashed throughout the space, everything ranging from the original, pinball-esque 1930s models invented by Donald Munro to contemporary, custom-built tables some consider the game's Cadillac. The collection of games

is an assemblage of Capizzi's love of table hockey and an extrapolation of a fanaticism that began as a little kid when he would step behind the rods and square off against older brother Tony, a WTHL compatriot.

"He'd be studying, I didn't have homework, I'd wait for him and be knocking on the door, 'Are you done? You done?' I'd wait for him (from college) and we would play best four-of-seven," said the 55-year-old Capizzi. "A lot of times, we'd go a whole seven-game series but three five-minute periods, so 15-minute games, and we'd be playing and playing for hours."

Those battles between the Capizzi brothers unwittingly became the foundation for what would in time become the WTHL, as friendly competition begat friendly tournaments begat the creation of an official league. That inaugural season in 1989 – its first contest played on a 1985 Coleco 5380 unit, because a trust record was kept of such things – featured its own Original Six, which included Sal, Tony, cousins Mike and Antonio Capizzi and friends Brian Clem-

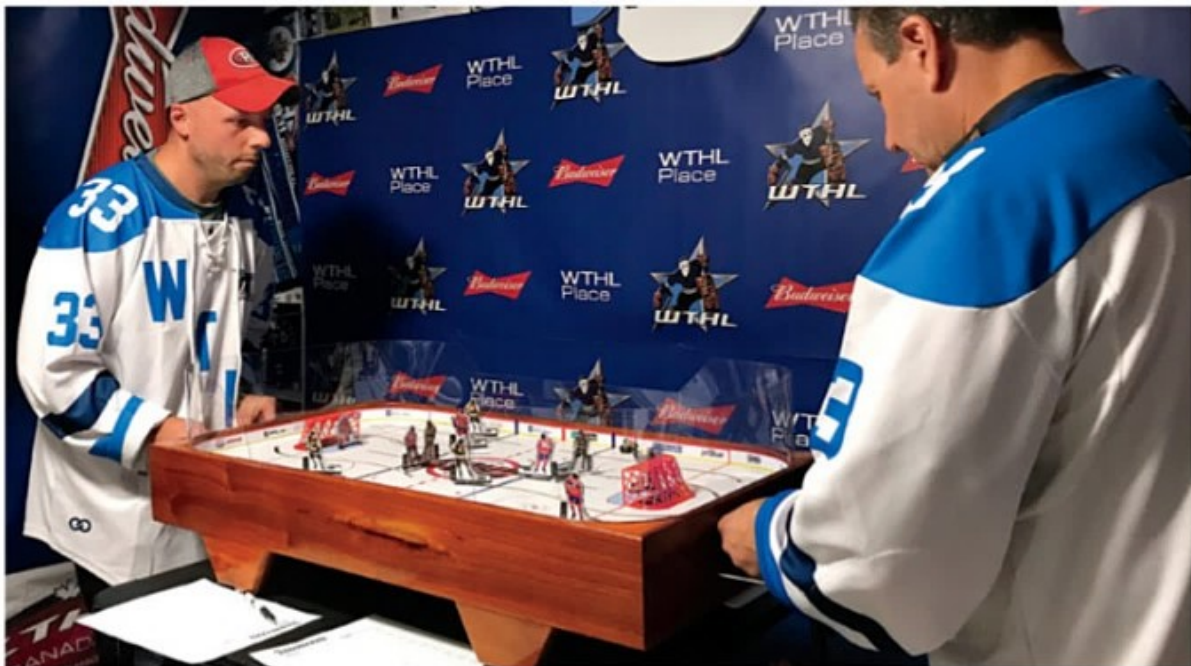
ent and Zachary Mesman. The WTHL is now in its 34th season and is the third-oldest league of its kind in North America. As the current president of the Canadian Table Hockey Association and, until recently, the continental manager for North America of the International Table Hockey Federation, you can take Capizzi's word on that.

Over time, the league has fluctuated in size and scale. The six founding members have remained fixtures, but the all-time roster includes an additional 35 players whose participation has ranged from a few games to more than a couple hundred. The seasons vary in length but generally last as long as an NHL campaign. Essentially, the league plays a series of tournaments whenever everyone can get together, with cumulative records throughout the season making up the overall league standings. Capizzi has won 26 league titles and close to 130 career tournaments. He is also the all-time games-played leader at nearly 1,300.

Filling out the ranks has never been an issue, either. Be

it through word of mouth or chance encounter, the WTHL has always managed to find its fill of players. There are also those who have not-so-subtly hinted to current WTHL players they'd love an introduction to the league's kingpin, as well as those who, while not players themselves, are intrigued simply by the league's existence. "People that aren't in this group here, they're like, 'I've never heard of anything like that. That's so incredible,'" said Dean Turman, now in his seventh year as part of the WTHL. "To have something like this and in this environment, too, it's like a society that you've never seen and heard, like the Masonry."

It should be said, however, Capizzi's desire has never been to make the WTHL some cloak-and-dagger table-hockey guild. He's a champion of the game and his desire to grow it is palpable. In his day-to-day as an elementary-school P.E. teacher, he's made a point of bringing tables around to teach kids about hand-eye coordination, fair play and as a valuable



season as a full-fledged member. "He's 18, so they've had the games around, but they didn't grow up with them because they've had Playstation and

er guys who didn't grow up on it but enjoy it and keep coming."

Of course, having a father-son duo has the benefit of breeding some of the healthy competition any league worth its salt is built on. And it's all in good fun. Unlike on some table-hockey circuits, no money changes hands in the WTHL. The league's only cash event is the Challenge Cup, which sees all proceeds donated to CancerCare Manitoba. Notably, the 2015 event raised in the neighborhood of \$1,100.

But don't take the WTHL's good nature to mean there aren't rivalries. Or, more specifically, one rivalry: almost all in attendance at a recent WTHL event jest that, on game nights, it's everyone versus the Capizzis. And, hey, that's something

IT'S ALL ON THE TABLE

The WTHL doesn't play with money on the line, but that doesn't mean the competition isn't fierce.

of a badge of honor for the brothers. The desire to knock either of the Capizzis off makes sense, too, given their combined accomplishments. Sal, with nearly 950 all-time wins, is the group's Wayne Gretzky; Tony's .652 career winning percentage is second all-time.

But more than wins or losses, more than prizes, tourney victories and league titles, more than even the seemingly once-in-a-lifetime chance to land a victory over either of the Capizzi brothers, what all in the WTHL pride themselves on is the chance to keep the game alive and carry it into a new generation. That is the spirit of the WTHL and what Capizzi has fostered over the league's three-plus decades. "I know I did this as a kid and most of us probably have, so to come back and do it 40 years later is pure fun," Turman said. "Who gets together and does something like this? It just doesn't happen, unless you're paying for something. This is like if somebody started their own pool hall in their basement. What Sal does to organize this is top-notch." H

TO HAVE SOMETHING LIKE THIS AND IN THIS ENVIRONMENT, TOO, IT'S LIKE A SOCIETY THAT YOU'VE NEVER SEEN AND HEARD, LIKE THE MASONRY — Dean Turman

lesson in accepting defeat. That mentality has filtered through to other league members, not the least of whom is Jeff Langelier, a member since 2008. His son, Josh, is now in his third full

Xbox," said the elder Langelier. "So even though (table hockey) still exists, this has been his exposure to it. It's cool we've been able to introduce the game and the sport to some of the young-