In the Zone

On a midwinter Saturday afternoon at the King Pong table tennis club in downtown Manhattan, two men are playing Ping-Pong. It’s a sport best appreciated in person: when hit by a skilled player, balls can easily reach speeds of 30 miles per hour, traveling a table’s length in an eye blink. Both these players are skilled.

One of them is Evgeny Nudler, an HHMI investigator and molecular biologist at New York University. Today he’s just an intense guy with a paddle, moving with almost preternatural anticipation of what looks less like an orange ball than a laser beam.

“You don’t focus on anything. You just empty your mind and use your reflexes,” he says later. “That’s why I really like Ping-Pong. You cannot think about anything else.”

Sure, Ping-Pong is good exercise, a way of being more than hands and eyes attached to a computer. As the game goes on, Nudler works up a welcome sweat. But it’s more than good exercise. After a 60-hour workweek, with many more ostensibly free hours spent thinking about research, Nudler seeks escape.

“I need some distraction from work,” he says, “to completely switch off my brain.”

He’s not complaining. Nudler loves his work. But running a 25-person lab, with multiple lines of research—studying the molecular mechanisms underlying gene expression and cellular responses to heat shock, for example—is all-consuming.

Helping Nudler leave that effort behind, at least momentarily, is Slava Solganik, a former theoretical physicist and emigrant from Ukraine. (Nudler is from Moscow, arriving in New York in 1993, shortly after the collapse of state-funded research sent Russia’s science into disarray.) They’ve met on afternoons like this for a decade, and now trade shots like fencers.

Slow rallies quickly turn into ballistic barrages with barely a pause in the staccato of ball on paddle. At times the game seems less like competition than choreography. Solganik’s movements are short and compact, while Nudler puts his entire body into his shots.

He’s light on his feet, with flowing movements hinting at the Japanese martial arts he practiced for many years.

On this day, Solganik wins. Next Saturday they’ll meet again, sending the ball blurring between them for another blissful hour. “It makes you empty your mind. I think it’s good for you,” Nudler says. “It’s like a good sleep.” —Brandon Keim