

By Will Higgins

There once was a very small boy from Indianapolis who happened upon table tennis and soon could beat anyone and everyone – and did.

The very small boy proceeded to cut a very large swath through the city, the state, the nation and beyond – he became famous.

But only for a little while. Later, and not that much later, his music...stopped.

It began stylishly, it began like a fairy tale, it began like this: Late summer 1932; the boy is 15-years-old, he is 4 foot, 8 inches tall and weighs not 100 pounds; he and a friend play tennis on a public court near where College Avenue crosses Fall Creek; it begins to rain; you can't play tennis in the rain.

The small boy's friend (his name lost to history) suggests they retreat to the friend's house where he has in his basement a fun, newish game some people were calling Ping Pong, others table tennis.

The small boy was already good at hitting at a tennis ball, and he was exceptionally nimble, his footwork honed through years of tap dancing. He'd been hoofing professionally on vaudeville stages throughout Indianapolis nearly half his life -- the buck-and-wing, the

Shim Sham, the Shuffle-off-to-Buffalo. He'd won the state Charleston championship at age 10!

His name was James Hodgson "Jimmy" McClure. He and his friend ducking out of that rainstorm in the summer of 1932 and going down into that basement – that would form the core of his legend:

"It was from that lowly level that the boy prodigy started his climb," said the *Indianapolis Star*.

"Pinging in the Rain," said the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in a headline above a story about the "amazing little Jimmy McClure of Indianapolis."

Table tennis had been invented around the turn of the 20th century but was marketed as an idle pastime, a party game – remember Twister? -- and it soon faded. It resurged in Europe in the 1920s, this time as a serious sport.

The first table tennis world championships were held in London in 1926, with players coming from all over Europe, Great Britain and Asia.

No Americans -- the game hadn't caught on here yet. By the 1930s, however, it had. It was everywhere -- New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Cleveland, Louisville, and on and on. Indianapolis had, by 1936, no fewer than five table tennis clubs, one of them in the swanky Test Building on Monument Circle. Table tennis was the pickleball of its day.

Tournaments were held, city championships, state championships, national championships. Sportswriters covered these matches and wrote them up at length. Star players became well known – at least one of them made it onto a Wheaties box!

At the time he discovered the game, Jimmy McClure's life was on pause. He'd graduated from Shortridge High School (having skipped two grades) but had postponed college on account of his physical immaturity. "I was only 56 inches tall and weighed 85 pounds," McClure said later, "so I thought it best to wait awhile." It's possible he hadn't reached puberty.

While waiting for his body to grow (which it did, some), McClure got a job as a messenger for a department store and took what dance jobs came his way – variety shows, movie theater grand openings and, at least once, a minstrel show.

McClure's dance mentor was Emma Hewes, the daughter of Theodore F. Hewes, the publisher of the *Inland Poultry Journal* and the organizer, in 1917, of the largest chicken show ever held in Indianapolis – 1,200 chickens!

A chicken magnate's daughter could afford to study dance in Europe then, back in Indianapolis, open her own dance school, the Hewes College of Fine Arts.

Emma Hewes died suddenly. Fast-moving spinal meningitis got her at 39. She felt poorly Saturday and was gone Monday.

Along came another, very different sort of dance mentor for Jimmy McClure: Mary Louise Cecilia “Texas” Guinan, a bawdy sybarite famous for running speakeasies and girly shows in New York during Prohibition – 49 arrests, by one count.

(“Tex” Guinan is long forgotten but a few years ago nearly had a comeback. Madonna was to play her in a Martin Scorsese movie. But Madonna hurt herself falling off a horse and was out of commission a while, and the project stalled.)

Tex Guinan put together a floor show she called “Too Hot for Paris” and took it on the road. In August 1933 the show landed in Indianapolis, at the Circle Theater. The *Indianapolis Star*’s drama critic, Corbin Patrick, loved its “variety of young women who display the flesh in rhythmic motion.”

In addition to the young women’s rhythmic flesh the show featured a 16-year-old Methodist known as “Hoosierland’s champion juvenile stepper,” Jimmy McClure.

McClure was a hit. Tex Guinan asked him to come on the road with the show. McClure’s parents nixed that but said yes to Guinan’s invitation for their son to come to Hollywood post-tour to appear in a “Too Hot for Paris” motion picture then in the works.

Jimmy McClure seemed to be heading towards a career in showbiz. But just weeks later that door closed with Guinan’s sudden death, mid-tour, of amoebic dysentery.

(Young McClure saw more than his share of sudden death; besides Hewes and Guinan, two of his uncles perished out of the blue, one of a heart attack while leaving traffic court, the other in an elevator accident. “Dies in Elevator,” “Killed in Elevator,” “Crushed to Death” – these were the headlines; Indianapolis once had three vibrant daily newspapers.)

McClure focused on his table tennis. He caught the attention of Indianapolis’ top players, who began practicing with him and showing him things, particularly Jerome Jacobs. Jacobs worked at his family’s sporting goods store in Downtown Indianapolis. There was a table in the back of the store.

McClure never had a single formal lesson, he was a natural. Soon he was good enough to make the “B” team in a match between players from Indianapolis and Dayton, Ohio.

Soon after that, in December 1933, he entered the Indianapolis City Championships, along with 102 others. He may have been the youngest entrant. He was 17. A stunning thing happened: McClure won the tournament. In the final, against perennial city and state champion Richard Mills, McClure prevailed lopsidedly, three games to none.

Things snowballed. McClure kept entering tournaments and kept winning. Within months he was the champion of the entire state of Indiana and champion also of the state of Ohio and then the champion at an even larger tournament in Chicago called the Intercities.

And two months after that, in Cleveland, McClure won the American Ping Pong Association's national championship. Newspapers around the country ran his photograph. He is tousle-haired, he holds his trophy and smiles shyly, he resembles a young Mickey Rooney. The newspapers nickname him "Babyface."

From there it was on to New York for the biggest tournament in the U.S., the American Zone Qualifier. The winner there would represent the nation at the world championships in London.

In New York McClure would encounter for the first time a Brooklyn-born showboat named Sol Schiff, thought by many to be the nation's best player. The two met in the final and right away McClure was in trouble. In table tennis, said the writer Stefan Kanfer, "One player is constantly on the anvil awaiting the hammer. Or he is the hammer itself."

McClure was on the anvil.

There was chatter among the several hundred spectators that the Indiana boy was overrated, and McClure might have heard the disrespect because, according to one account, "he suddenly grabbed his paddle with both hands

and as if to wring himself into action, shook it at the table then began an attack of his own.”

Now the match was “brilliantly played,” said the Associated Press, with players smashing spectacularly and retrieving no less spectacularly – from 20 feet behind the table, sometimes further.

Schiff had leads late in the next three games but McClure rallied to snatch each of them to win the match and the tournament and a trip to London.

He returned to Indianapolis a hero. “Come in and get acquainted with an Indianapolis boy who is making good in a big way,” said a newspaper ad for the Wm. H. Block department store. “Jimmy will be in Block’s Boys Shop Monday, Wednesday, Thursday. This will be the last opportunity for Jimmy’s admirers and friends to wish him well before (he departs for) London, England and the World’s Championship Tournament!”

Kurt Vonnegut, born in Indianapolis six years after McClure, wrote in *Timequake*: “No matter what a young person thinks he or she is really hot stuff at doing he or she is sooner or later going to run into somebody in the same field who will cut him or her a new asshole, so to speak.” Vonnegut made his point by noting that as a youth he was “no slouch” at table tennis, but his pal William Henry Comingore “Skip” Failey was unbeatable. Skip’s serve! “No matter how I tried to return it,” Vonnegut explained, “I already knew it would go up my nose or out

the window or back to the factory, anywhere but on the table.”

But, Vonnegut recalled, the day came when Skip Failey ran up against a boy named Roger Downs, and afterward Skip hung his head and said: “Roger cut me a new asshole.”

Jimmy McClure would not have put it that way. High-born youngsters like Kurt Vonnegut Jr., perhaps to cultivate a dangerous vibe, or at least a not-so-coddled vibe, tend to be comfortable with salty language. It doesn’t hold them back.

But Jimmy McClure, whose father was a brick layer, seemed to understand that if he talked that way he’d have been written off as low-rent.

Still, Vonnegut had a good point. The competitors at the London World’s, with names like Tibor, Istvan, Laszlo, and Viktor, were a cut above. McClure got creamed. “The young American champion from Indianapolis simply looked a little out of his class when the boys from Lithuania, Hungary and other European countries started batting curves,” the AP reported.

This young American champion from Indianapolis – what was he thinking as he headed home to Indiana, colostomized. He travelled via ocean liner, the voyage took a week, he’d have had time to think.

What did he think? Impossible to know. Jimmy McClure left behind nothing in writing, no letters, no journal, no diary, certainly no autobiography. (It's fun to see who wrote an autobiography and who didn't: George Washington, the father of the country, didn't; Larry Harmon, TV's original Bozo the Clown, did.)

The thoughts McClure was thinking must have been positive, however, because he kept working on his game, and when the next World Championships rolled around, McClure was all in. The host city was Prague, the city of Kafka, bat-eared, afraid of mice, who just a couple decades prior blew minds with sentences like: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into an enormous insect."

In doubles McClure partnered with a 16-year-old St. Louis boy named Bud Blattner.

He and McClure made an odd pair, McClure small and terrier-like, Blattner 6-foot tall and sturdy and so athletic that two years later he'd quit table tennis for baseball and soon would be playing second base for the St. Louis Cardinals.

Things started badly for McClure-Blattner. Blattner overslept their first-round match, and he and McClure were defaulted. "But we talked to the officials and they

finally let us go on with the match,” Blattner later recounted. “We won that one and the next one.” And the next, and the next and the next and the next. McClure and Blattner won the tournament!

So...as Jimmy McClure awoke the next morning...he found himself transformed in his bed from tap-dancing department store messenger boy to World Champion table tennis player.

His metamorphosis was apparent. An Indianapolis newspaper ran a photo of McClure holding his trophy. He wears a dark, three-piece suit, a pocket square, a white shirt and a clubby-looking bow tie. He smiles confidently. His hair has product in it, it lays flat.

On and on McClure rolled. At the next World Championships, in Baden bei Wien, outside Vienna, he and Blattner won again.

The following year the World's returned to London, a city mad for table tennis. The game was everywhere, in sooty basement and fancy private clubs, even in Buckingham Palace where, it was reported, King George VI had “perfected a special shot of his own” that his opponents judged “unplayable”

(This was surely a stretch. So many kings throughout history, and at least one American president, live their

whole lives surrounded by sycophants, duped, never realizing their judgement isn't really that sound, their jokes aren't really that funny and their shots are really quite playable.)

McClure was 21, he had won two World Championships. He had developed a confident, even rowdy on-court presence that stood out in a sport known for decorum. "Attaboy!" he'd shout. And "Hot Diggety!" and "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!"

Over the course of a week the British press would describe McClure as "the mercurial American," "the fiery headed American," "the fiery headed little American," and "the excitable American."

McClure's confidence showed even in his clothes. He wore dark-colored sneakers instead of the conventional white and was, the *Daily Mail* noted, "resplendent in blue satin trousers and red singlet." These were the days before short pants. The players wore long, pleated trousers.

McClure had taken to rolling up the cuffs of his pant legs during matches. He'd roll up them up further and further as a match wore on and the going got tough. His pants looked like Capri's by the end of his marathon final at the 1938 Worlds in London.

McClure's doubles partner that year was his former nemesis, Sol Schiff, the New York hot dog. Their opponents in the final were Viktor Barna and Laszlo Bellak, Hungarian-born superstars. Wasp-waisted Barna, a 5-time world champion who'd recently fled his homeland's anti-Semitism and was living in London, is the one who made it onto the Wheaties box.

The packed gallery at Wembley's 12,000 seat Empire Pool rooted hard for him.

The match was filmed. Two points are preserved on YouTube. In one, Barna serves to Schiff; Schiff hits a deep but not hard forehand to the middle of the table to Bellak's backhand; Bellak flicks a firm, angled crosscourt that catches McClure by surprise; McClure jumps to his right, lunges, catches the ball below the table and returns it with underspin to the middle of the table; Barna is waiting and cracks a mean forehand crosscourt, hitting behind Schiff who had started to his left; Schiff recovers, changes direction, chips a soft backhand.

Bellak takes Schiff's backhand chip and hits a drop shot, a deft dink that sends McClure sprinting forward; McClure gets to the ball, bunts it back. Again Barna is waiting; he blasts a forehand crosscourt; Schiff fields it with his backhand from well off the table but leaves it soft and high and in the middle of the table for Bellak's forehand.

A sitter.

But Bellak, obviously mindful of McClure's quickness, his ability to retrieve even the most impossible shots, overcooks the forehand and sends the ball off the table.

Match point is preserved, too. McClure surprises Barna with a confusing spin serve, Barna leaves his return short, Schiff finishes with a massive forehand. It's not much of a point. But the ensuing joy is beautiful: Jimmy McClure races to Sol Schiff, collapses into his Schiff's arms. The two embrace, do a 360 – they practically polka -- on their way to shake hands with their somber, vanquished opponents.

And then, the awards ceremony: McClure and Schiff, champions of the world, mount a podium. A spotlight is trained on them, gold medals are placed on them. The *Star Spangled Banner* is played for them, 12,000 Britons stand for them...

And then...

Germany invades Poland, England and France declare war on Germany, a second world war begins, Jimmy McClure joins the navy as a radio operator. The table tennis World Championship ceases, and remains ceased for six years.

It resumes in 1947, but by then McClure is 31. His reflexes have slowed, his eyesight is not as keen. His table tennis magic is behind him. His music has stopped. “You remember how you used to play,” McClure said as an old man. “And when you can’t play the same, it’s not as much fun.”

Up to this point McClure’s life had paralleled the “Hero’s Journey,” that classic and ubiquitous literary formula wherein the protagonist is called to a mission faraway where he or she confronts great obstacles; things look bad for a while, but the hero somehow manages to overcome the obstacles. He or she triumphs.

Dorothy Gale, Luke Skywalker, Bilbo Baggins, Simba...Odysseus.

Odysseus’ hero’s journey, from the 8th century, is the template: The man fights a foreign war and wins it then, on his way home, must cross a roiling sea. He must outsmart a one-eyed monster that eats people, must deal with a sorcerer who turns men into pigs, must fend off a beautiful woman who’s crazy about him (and owns her own island!). He arrives home and must slaughter his wife’s many suitors using only a bow and arrow. He does it, he triumphs. He gets his wife back, gets his farm back. *A Ta Da!* moment, to be sure.

And then what? We have no idea. Homer stops writing with Odysseus' crescendo. End of story.

But the real Hero's Journey doesn't end in glamorous triumph. It *begins* there. Retirement, irrelevance, music stoppage – that is the hard part.

What does a person do with their life when they no longer can do what they're great at, what they were put on this earth to do? It's a universal dilemma whether you were a ping pong player who won championships, a lawyer who won cases, a physician who saved lives....

People handle it in different ways: some travel, some volunteer, some golf, some watch cable TV news and become furious.

Jimmy McClure, by now balding and needing glasses, did this: He swept out the basement of his parents' house at 1718 N. Central Ave. (it's still standing), he built a counter out of glass block, he placed a cash register on top of the counter and he began...retailing. An ad in the *Indianapolis Star*: "Jimmy McClure Table Tennis Co., Open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. Save 20 to 40 percent on tables, balls, nets, paddles!"

Bad timing.

Table tennis in America was just then fizzling: Table tennis clubs closed; tournaments drew fewer and fewer entrants.

McClure pivoted, diversifying his merch into badminton and squash and tennis and....Parker pens. And electric razors -- they were new at the time, and McClure carried both Schick and Remington.

It was an odd mix and not a successful one, but McClure's overhead was low -- he officed in his parents' basement and slept upstairs in his childhood bedroom.

He lived with his mom and dad until he was 40, at which time he married Nellie Smith Orr, 36, a strong, intelligent divorcee who had a good mind for business and a love of animals.

McClure would join the Masons and wore a floppy hat of purple velvet. Nel would join the Order of the Eastern Star.

The McClures would move into an apartment building called the Sherwood, at 1304 N. Delaware St., within earshot of a non-denominational church heavy on "miracles" as performed by a dynamic young preacher who later would lead his flock to mass suicide in a South American jungle. The church was the Peoples Temple, the dynamic young preacher was Jim Jones.

Soon the McClures would move from the Sherwood to an apartment in the 3500 block of North Pennsylvania Street. Around the corner lived a woman named Marguerite Dice, who in December of that year, 1958, would host a

weekend confab of a dozen well-off conspiracy theorists who believed the Civil Rights movement was a communist plot and fluoride in the water was a communist plot and Dwight Eisenhower was a communist agent. And from that house party was birthed the John Birch Society, the forerunner of today's Republican Party.

The McClures did not have children but they did have a parrot. They coddled their parrot, they let it out of its cage to fly around the apartment and squawk. Parrots are loud. If you search the internet for "How do you get your parrot to shut up," a bunch of stuff comes up: "Two Different Reasons a Parrot will Scream"; "the Five Reasons Your Parrot Screams"; "Tips to Get Your Parrot to be Quiet"; and finally, ominously: "Solve Your Parrot's Screaming Problem for Good."

Jimmy McClure's life, once extraordinary, had become so ordinary that in trying hard to hold the reader's attention, I've resorted to describing McClure's neighbors who, while strange and interesting, are entirely beside the point. The bit about the parrot is tangential as well and may have gone on too long.

McClure kept retailing from his parents' basement and kept hoping table tennis would make a comeback. And in 1972 he had reason to feel optimistic following the historic "Ping Pong Diplomacy," a thawing of relations between the

U.S. and China. The American table tennis team visited China and played a series of matches there. They posed on the Great Wall and made the cover of Time Magazine. They came home celebrities, they went on Dick Cavett and Johnny Carson. “There’ll be a table tennis boom, it can’t miss,” he told a reporter.

It missed.

So. This story is going downhill and has been since 1938, but it ends well. It ends, if not heroically, at least profitably.

Jimmy McClure kept on retailing, and though there was no table tennis boom there was a tennis boom. Tennis began the 1970s as a small enterprise, a country club sport. But then it got personality, and the networks put it on TV. The raunchy behavior of players like Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe made the sport interesting to a wider audience. Americans began taking to the courts in droves. By 1980 there were 35 million tennis players in the U.S.

McClure became heavily involved in Indianapolis’ expanding tennis scene, serving for many years as an official during the local pro tournament. He had diversified his shop into tennis years earlier and now it took over his business. Throughout the entire 1970s McClure’s was the only place in Indianapolis where you could buy quality tennis equipment – rackets, strings, shoes, clothing etc. McClure relocated from his parents’ basement to a

storefront in trendy Broad Ripple and soon was moving so much merch he spread out into the storefront next door.

He and Nel prospered and were able to buy a house in the tony Indianapolis suburb of Meridian Hills, with a back yard large enough for a dozen dogs if Nel wanted them. Which she did – so many dogs the McClures had to feed them in platoons.

When they reached their mid-sixties the McClures sold the shop for a hefty profit. They did what people do once the battle is won. They bought a Cadillac. They moved to Florida and after a while died there, Jimmy first, in 2005 at age 88.

Very little fuss was made when the end came. Table tennis in America had become a small thing. Few remembered Jimmy McClure's heroics from six decades prior.

One who did was an old table tennis enthusiast from Cleveland, Ohio named Berndt Mann. Mann had in his possession film of some of the great matches of the 1930s. McClure's death moved Mann to write the following and post it online:

"Many times I've watched with deep delight/
Those grainy films in black and white/
Delighting in the legend's play/

I watched them once again last night/
Will watch them still again today/
But this time watch with joy and grief/
With joy, still marveling at his play/
With grief, now knowing Death the thief/
Has stolen the Legend McClure away”

----30---