





Open All Hours

Formed a century ago in a confectionary shop on the Pfarrplatz in Baden bei Wien, Lower Austria, the Badener Athletiksport Club (BAC) can lay just claim to being the oldest table tennis club in the world whose doors have never closed.

Remarkably, despite all the troubles and turmoil over the years, the club has remained open, welcoming novices and artisans alongside players of global stature.

At the inaugural meeting on Thursday 9th October 1924, Konrad Neidhardt was elected secretary, over the years he held every post imaginable: treasurer, advisor and more. He was the motivating force.

Following the end of World War Two, he became the first secretary of the Austrian Table Tennis Federation (ÖTTV). It is mainly thanks to his efforts and with the support of founder members Richard Fux, Hans Gläser, Dr Eugen

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Grabscheid and Karl Mach, alongside Hans Gläser, a Berliner, the first club manager, that the organisation survived the years of global conflict and entered the post war period without a break in activities.

In 1925, the club was accepted as a member of the Vienna Table Tennis Association, first taking part in the Vienna Championships in 1926, the year when this association was transformed to become the Austrian Table Tennis Association (ÖTTV), a founder member of the International Table Tennis Federation.

It was only after the formation of ITTF that BAC could ▶

Andreas Meixner, President Badener AC, **left** and **right** recent member Mahdi Amadian



compete on an international level. In 1928, a BAC women's team competed in the Vienna Championships, a member of the team being Josefina Kolbe; at the 1930 World Championships she was a women's singles and, with Etta Neumann, a women's doubles bronze medallist.

Also, in 1930 the first Austrian national champion from BAC emerged, Erwin Kohn. He successfully defended the title in 1931, before winning again in 1934, the same year when Dr Eugen Grabscheid became ÖTTV President.

Kohn was a match for the best, notably recording a win over former world champion, Victor Barna; he made his

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debut at the World Championships in 1930; in a four-year period he claimed one silver and six bronze medals, before in 1936 alongside Richard Bergmann, Helmut Goebel, Hans Hartinger and Alfred Liebster he was a member of the team that won the Swaythling Cup. Soon after in 1938, being of Jewish descent, he fled to England, then emigrated to Argentina.

Success on the international scene had an effect: table tennis was becoming ever more popular, and in 1933 BAC staged the World Championships and again in 1937, the

venue on both occasions the Trinkhalle, nowadays Casino Baden, the latter event witnessing a contest that was not finally resolved until 64 years later.

Trude Pritzi, who the previous year when 16 years old, had become the first player from BAC player to win the women's singles national title, faced Ruth Aarons of the United States in the final. Neither was prepared to take a risk; after one-and three-quarter hours only two games had been completed. The Jury disqualified both players and declared the title vacant. Later in 2001, ITTF rescinded the decision and declared Ruth Aarons and Gertrude Pritzi joint champions.

A landmark tournament, additionally in 1937, a promising teenager arrived on the scene. Richard Bergmann became the first Austrian to win the men's singles title at a World Championships; on Sunday 7th March, the day play concluded, he was 18 years and 331 days old, at the time the youngest to secure the title. One year later he was superseded by Bohumil Váňa, on Saturday 29th January, the closing date of the 1938 World Championships in London, he was 18 years and 12 days old. Bohumil Váňa remains to the present day, the youngest ever winner.

Less dramatic but important for BAC; on Thursday 20th May, BAC accounted Gmunden to secure the men's state team title.

Alas war clouds were looming, in 1938 Nazi Germany annexed Austria, arriving in Baden in March. Many clubs had to cease operations immediately as they also had Jews in their teams. Konrad Neidhardt became the Gau-fachwart of Niederdonau, a post synonymous with that of regional sports director; Niederdonau being an administrative district created by the Nazis that existed from

**TOP LEFT**

In 1933 Badener AC hosted the World Championships

TOP RIGHT

Richard Bergmann won the men's singles title at the World Championships when only 18 years old.

BELOW

Trude Pritzi, faced Ruth Aarons in the 1937 World Championships women's singles final; after one-and three-quarter hours only two games had been completed. The Jury disqualified both players and declared the title vacant.



1938 to 1945. Never a Nazi party member and using his diplomatic skills to the full, Neidhardt led the Austrian association and BAC through the turmoil and difficulties of World War Two.

Notably, in the 1939-1940 season only four table tennis clubs were active in Lower Austria, one being BAC. They succeeded in staging the Greater German Championships, similar to the World Championships, the venue was the Trinkhalle. Josef Karlhofer was crowned all-German youth champion; former BAC members, Trude Pritzi and Otto Eckl competed.

Times had changed dramatically, the effect of Nazi occupation meant the Lower Austrian Championships were not staged. However, the Viennese Championships were held, in 1942 represented by Beyerl Hobik, Sima Seyk and Wessely, the BAC women's team finished in second place.

Against the odds, despite the political situation, the club continued to function. On Sunday 2nd April 1944, the Trinkhalle staged the last major tournament before the end of World War Two, the so-called "Ostmark Championships". The following year, on Monday 25th March 1945, BAC played their last league match before peace ensued. Facing Enzesfeld they led 4-2, but owing to

the air raid alarms sounding, the match had to be abandoned.

Conflict in Europe over, on Friday 15th June 1945, the club played its first post war team match, competing against Vienna. Starting from 1946, BAC once again competed in the Viennese championship, with club member Seppel Kahrhofer being one of Austria's best players of the era.

Friendly matches were held in Baden, and at Christmas 1946, matches on a similar basis were staged in Graz. Starting again with the 1948-1949 season, the Lower Austrian Team Championships returned. BAC enjoyed notable success: the club became the first Lower Austrian post war champions and cup winners. Soon after in 1950 a talented young player emerged, Robert Karall; he became one of the best players in Austria, by 1955 he was a regular member of the national team.

In 1962, BAC was recognized as one of the founder members of the state league, the club being accepted after the team comprising Robert Karall, Leo Schöberl and Alois Trumha achieved success in the promotion matches in Salzburg. Notably, one year later, another top player joined, Reinhard Engel. Together with Werner Zezula, several national titles were secured. ▶





Later, in 1965, Germany's Peter Held joined the club. In his very first year, with Reinhard Engel and Erwin Wagner completing the team, a runners up spot was achieved. The following season, the team finished in third position in both the state league and ETTU Cup; a great success. Soon after, in 1967, the club's Herbert Schöberl became national schools' champion; in 1972, national junior champion. Regrettably, the success was short-lived; in 1973, BAC voluntarily relegated to State League B, withdrawing in 1975 as both Reinhard Engel and Erwin Wagner were no longer available.

Conversely, in the same year, the women's team progressed to State League A, the trio comprising Melitta Legenstein, Traude Mitter and Renate Brammen finishing in eight place. The following season with Sylvia Wachter joining the team, fifth position was achieved. Later in 1977-78, Monika Sandpeck was added to the line-up; playing alongside Melitta Legenstein, sixth place was the outcome. Progress continued the following season, Renate Dissauer included in the line-up, the team finished in fourth position.

However, the main progress was made away from the arena. In 1979 a sponsorship agreement was signed with Spielbanken AG, henceforth the club's name being TT Casino Baden AC. Soon after, in 1980 a dedicated hall was built which afforded the club a permanent home. Meanwhile, in the women's division, with Alexandra Leitgeb joining Renate Dissauer and Melitta Legenstein, the team gained runners up spot. However, owing to injuries and departures, the following year the team had to withdraw from National League A.

In 1983, the men's team secured promotion to National League B after an eight year absence. Two years later, they returned to State League A. Notable names included Hungary's Zoltan Horvath who lined up alongside promising young players Herbert Schöberl, Walter Klein and

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Martin Zillner. Later Peter Gockner, a player with a host of national titles to his credit, joined the club as did national team colleagues Martin Doppler and Thorsten Huber. Additionally, a further new member was Slovakia's Tomas Janci, a player who was to rise to no.49 on the World rankings. This team proceeded to achieve fourth place in the 1993-1994 season: in the ensuing season, a solid fifth position.

The team's major success was in 1994, when BAC became the first Austrian club to win a European title. They won the Europe Intertoto Cup, a performance that paid great credit to the efforts of Kurt Posiles, the club chairman; Tomas Janci, Martin Doppler, Martin Zillner and Thorsten Huberbeing were the principal team members.

Unfortunately, in 1995, Casinos Austria AG withdrew sponsorship and financial turbulence ensued, ultimately culminating in the withdrawal of the mens team from the state league A. In the same year, there was a change in club leadership: Alois Trumha took office and managed the club until 2005.

Despite financial restrictions, Herbert Schöberl and Walter Klein being the major players, the men's team maintained their strength for a decade in the regional league, never in any danger of relegation. During that period, BAC secured the men's team title at the 1998-1999 regional championships, proving that passion and commitment can lead to remarkable successes even without major financial support.

**FAR LEFT**

The 2023-2024 men's team **left to right** Eric Glod, Andi Meixner, Amin Ahmadian, and Patrik Juhasz.

CENTRE TOP

The hall prior to renovation.

CENTRE BELOW

The hall following renovation.

RIGHT

Elfi Reithofer, a stalwart member, successful in every conceivable age group.



Conversely, for the women, life was quieter; there was a joint venture between Casino Baden and Gumpoldskirchen, the team being formed by Elfi Reithofer and Sonja Stepan from BAC, alongside Edith Huber from Gumpoldskirchen. They competed in the Central Championships South, their best result being runners up. Creditably, at the Lower Austrian Championships, Elfi Reithofer won women's singles bronze and women's doubles silver alongside Edith Huber.

At the dawn of the millennium, more emphasis was placed on youth development, success soon followed. Marianne Schwaiger and Mateja Mijatovic established themselves amongst the country's best young female players. In 2006, Mijatovich was runner-up in the mini cadet girls' singles category. The pair became junior girls' doubles champions in 2007; two years later, representing Lower Austria, they secured the under 15 girls' doubles title. Further success in a range of events and age groups followed, Marianne Schwaiger represented Austria on several occasions at the European Youth Championships.

Later, with Claudia Faltinger and Aleksandra Kovac completing the line-up, the team finished in 11th place in the second division of the State League, and eventually with players such as Hungarian Orsi Körmendi and former Austrian national player Silvana Winkler joining the team, third position was achieved in the season 2011-2012. It was to be the last season for Winkler, the following year 10th place was the outcome. Since then, the line up has been ever-changing. In the 2019-2020 season, the club joined the newly formed women's national league first division; it is where the team plays to the present day. Currently the squad comprises Daniela Petrekova, Lucia Östergaard, Lara Taborsky, Valerie Glatthard and former top Israeli player, Nicole Trosman.

Likewise for the men, young players arrived on the scene, notably David Serdaroglu. Alongside Josef Hafiz, Thomas

Berger and veteran Johann Rottensteiner the team competed in the second division of the national league.

Significantly, in 2012 the Levenko family came to Baden: father Dmitrij and 14-year-old son Andreas. Alongside Jörg Pichler, they claimed fourth position. Major success followed came in 2014 when Kazakhstan's Kirill Gerassimenko joined the squad. They won the second division and thus gained progress to the first division for the

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2015-2016 season, strengthened by Bulgaria's Stanislav Golovanov; the team achieved a top four result.

Changes followed: in addition to Kazakhstan's Aidos Kenzhigulov, Luxembourg's Eric Glod joined the club alongside promising young Austrians Alex Chen and Narayan Kapolnek. Following the departure of Andreas Levenko, the team was relegated from the top division, immediately returning the following season. Hungary's Patrik Juhasz, Iran's Amin Ahmadian and Narayan Kapolnek formed the backbone of the team.

Top division status has been maintained since 2020, where the local teenager, 18-year-old Marc Sagawe has been introduced to the team; alongside Amin Ahmadian, Eric Glod, Patrik Juhasz and Dastan Kenzhigulov, in the 2022-2023 season third place was outcome.

Third position but when considering longevity, a period without a break, for BAC it is first place, an achievement of which all concerned can be duly proud. ■