

## **Teenage Years**

I have always been active person and loved my sports since I've been a child. My sporting recollections are many and varied. My earliest recollection was when I was a child and went horse riding with the disabled at a Rockampton, just outside Thornbury.

From there and aged 12-years old, in 1977 attended a boarding school in Tonbridge, Kent for teenagers with cerebral palsy, which was then run by the Spastic Society, now known as Scope. During this period 1977 to 1983 had many happy and carefree sporting memories that I will never forget. I still carried on horse riding and went to a horse riding stables in Sevenoaks during those years. I had some pretty amazing horse riding experiences including riding inside Buckingham Palace stables and not many people can say that.

Around 1980 was selected for an international horse riding conference and exhibition that was held in the Midlands that also covered disability. The training sessions were intense and remember every Friday evening after school had finished for the week went to Sevenoaks for the weekly exhibition training sessions. The end result was worth it because at the conference was riding in front of an international audience. When we had finished the display one of the audience was so impressed with the exhibition invited the horse riding team to his stables located in the mountains of Norway. Without doubt the team took up his offer and duly went off to Norway the following summer for a week of horse riding in Norway.

At that time compared to the United Kingdom Norway air and rivers are so cleaned. To emphasise this point at the end of each day whilst on the ponies the group were able to ride the ponies into the rivers for a drink. On one of the nights went canoeing around midnight in the rivers and it was still light. However during the winter months Norway can be dark and cold without much light during the day.

Other sporting recollections including many sports included swimming, football, table tennis and snooker. Misspent youth or not but I loved it! Groups of people used to arrive at the school to play games against us from wheelchair races, wheelchair basketball, football, table tennis to swimming races. When people first arrived and if anyone felt sorry for us due to our disabilities soon evaporated when the wheelchair races were held and the visitors were trounced even when they were given a lead. I remembered on one occasion Gillingham football club sent a group of players to play games against us and one of the teenage footballers was Steve Bruce.

Every summer the 'Surrey Coaches' used to come to the school to play games against us and some famous sporting stars also arrived including Geoff Capes and the late George Best. Unfortunately I was away from school the day when George Best arrived. One of life's football legends!

One of the houseparent's knew the ITV football commentator Brian Moore and over the years were able to obtain commentary match day football tickets to watch games at Arsenal, Chelsea, Crystal Palace, Fulham and Gillingham.

However my love affair with football had already started in the mid 1970's when my father took me to watch my first live league match at Ashton Gate. I also remembered with fond memories having a season ticket in 1976-77 season when Bristol City were promoted to then the 1<sup>st</sup> Division and were playing at the time against some of the big clubs, Arsenal, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester United. However with my secondary school days beckoning only had the joys of watching the boys in red and white playing at the top table for one season before heading to Kent to further my education.

## **Adult Years**

Upon leaving my boarding school, Thomas Delarue in 1983, the next chapter of my live begun. Having appointments with four different school career officers and gaining different advice from each one of them on my job prospects I still didn't have a clue on what I wanted to do. In the end I took my own decision and went on a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) at Rolls-Royce aero engines in Bristol. The company were originally only going to employ five people out of approximately forty people and in the end they employed nearly half of the group. To this day I am still employed with Rolls-Royce as a business analyst.

People are wondering what sports I've been doing since 1983. In my young adult life my love of football was my main interest and would watch as much football as possible, whether it was Bristol City, Mangotsfield United or when one of my mates and I would travel away at weekends and attend matches at different league grounds that we haven't visited before. They were interesting days and could mention many stories on my football exploits. In between the football seasons would also travel around the country watching speedway. This was post Bristol Bulldogs and it is such a shame that they are no longer in existence and speedway is also not held in Bristol.

Then there is my own sporting participation. I was a late entrance into the world of disability sports at the age of 35 years old when I thought my life was going nowhere and out of the blue in 2000 received a letter from

South Gloucestershire Council informing there was going to be a disability sports taster day held at Bradley Stoke Leisure centre.

On the day of the disability sports taster day I ventured along to the leisure centre after work only to find one sport demonstration taking place, 'Special-Needs' judo. I had no intention of watching judo, let alone giving it a go. Anyway a member of the leisure centre staff took me along and the judo instructor (Sensei) enquired whether I was going onto the mat (Tatami) and I replied "No". The Sensei sat me down next to the parents of one of the players and we were discussing various things for around 10 minutes and they suggested that I should give it a try. I thought why not and got onto the tatami. It was good fun and thought, yes I can do this. After a few weeks I went over to Southville where Kodachi Special Needs judo club dojo (School or training hall for studying judo) are based and started judo at the age of 35 years old, which isn't bad going for an old'en. Juggling work full-time, attending college one-day a work studying towards my HND qualification in Business Studies and practicing judo all at the same time was a pretty hectic period in my life.

Judo certainly opened up so many doors and I've meet so many wonderful people during the four years that I played this sports. I was privileged to be selected by the club to enter numerous 'Special-Needs' tournaments in the United Kingdom from Cardiff, Glasgow, South-east, Midlands, but my favourite venue in United Kingdom was at Crystal Palace. Travelling around Europe was a fantastic experience and entered tournament in Germany, Holland, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden. The club stayed in some wonderful, but unusual places, like a castle in Germany and a former prison in Stockholm, which was converted into a youth hostel. That was an interesting place to stay and people over the years mentioned that I should have been kept behind bars!!! During the four years I trained and worked hard to towards my green belt and had won various tournaments along the way in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Beverwijk, in Holland was the main European tournament the club attended on a yearly basis. This was where I met a good friend and fellow judo competitor, Tim from Holland. To make it clear due to the nature of my disability, I could only train and compete at judo from a kneeling or sitting position (newazi) because judo would have been far too dangerous for me. Each judo bout lasted three minutes and if the score were equal would go into extra time for another one minute until the golden score or shiho (penalty point) was awarded and resulted in the end of the contest. If after this period the score was still unchanged then the three judges would vote on the overall winner of the contest. Three minutes might not seem long but the athlete had to be fit to compete at a good standard due to the high intensity of the sport. Therefore I would attend the gym two or three times a week to keep fit. This was especially for my judo competitions, Tim and I were great friends off the mat, but on the mat there were no quarters given and friendship went out of the window during each contest. From the start of the contest when the judge would say "Hajimi" (start) and for the next three minutes or longer we would fight like two war warriors. Sometimes Tim would win, and likewise I would be victories. Due to both players competing at a newazi position our feet would rub on the tatami (judo mat), resulting with our feet getting mat burns, which were painful. To overcome this problem and prior to the tournament contests Tim and I would have our feet badged up to reduce the risk of this happening. Looking back it was an amusing sight.

Towards the end of my judo exploits in 2004 when the sport was getting too much for my legs my attention was beginning to think on what I could do next. It would turn out the tournament in Stockholm, Sweden would be my final contest.

It was a few months prior to the Stockholm tournament and watching the 2004 Olympic Games held in Athens, Greece when I got extremely excited watching Matthew Pinsent winning the Coxless Four by the narrowest of margins when I thought "let's go onto the Paralympic website to view the different disability sports on offer". I vividly remember scrolling going down through the list of sports thinking to myself "too old, too old, can't run," etc and when the list was getting smaller and smaller until table tennis appeared and thought "yes, I can do that" and hence this is how I got involved with table tennis.

With a rush of blood I contacted the Bristol and District Table Tennis League and they put me in contact with Filton College table tennis club and the organiser of the Friday night practice sessions invited me to come along. Looking back it was pretty daunting because when I first walked into the room I didn't know anyone and the expected standard of play. When I got onto the table whilst I loved it I also appreciated my game was at a low standard. My forehand shots were a must to be seen and it is a shame that someone didn't video me at the time because other people would have been amazed with how I progressed over the years.

After attending the practice sessions for a few weeks I was asked would I like to have some coaching lessons on a Saturday morning and I replied "yes please". It was at this point when I had one-to-one sessions with a coach who later became a personal friend, Di McIlwain. For the first three months we were practicing the same range of shots trying to get me to use my forehand correctly. At first this approach was proving difficult and to make things worse through my disability I was jerking at the same time. It was bit by bit I slowly started to use my forehand correctly but it was hard work. I can also remember after about 6-weeks I came home from a coaching session and sat down watching a programme on television when my right shoulder started to ache and I couldn't work out why. This scenario occurred for a few weeks when I realised that I was using a

different part of my body that it wasn't used to. Gradually the more I played forehand shots correctly my body muscles were getting used to this routine.

Saturday morning coaching lessons I really enjoyed and getting out of bed was made easier knowing that I had something to look forward.

In the summer of 2005 or 2006 I was asked would I like to play in the Bristol and District summer league and I said "Yes". At this juncture I was still practicing playing table tennis on a Friday and knew that some of the players were at a high standard, but this didn't deter me because every player has to start from somewhere. This is the reason why I joined Filton College to play in the Bristol league.

I remember my table tennis handicap was pretty high, but after a few matches other people felt that I had a very long way to go to improve my game and someone contacted the league explaining the situation and the league increased my handicap to the highest level. Whilst the majority of my opponents were very considerate whilst thrashing me in every match they were allowing me to make the mistakes instead of smashing me off the table because it is no fun being at the end of a true trashing and equally my opponents wouldn't enjoy themselves knowing that someone trying their hardest was being smashed into oblivion. This approach ensured that I didn't have any negative thoughts and I could have lost heart and interest in the sport and left.

However not all my opponents were considerate whilst some people were equally disrespectful of my disability and were questioning whether I should even be playing table tennis? It just proves how narrow minded and shallow some people view individuals with a disability. However my attitude was to brush those crass comments aside and carried on playing table tennis relentless because I knew in time that I would be able to compete against other players on equal terms. It is only years further down the line when I started to ask myself "those people who had made those original comments must be thinking now?" because my game play has improved. Today some opponents mention I am an awkward opponent to play against and as a term of affection called "An awkward bugger to play against" and I take this as a great compliment. Even now when I am still losing matches I can walk off the table with my head held high and a smile on my face knowing that I must have played quite well. Winning is not the be all and end all, but it helps!

I cannot remember the exact year when I first entered my disability table tennis tournament at Grantham, Lincolnshire organised through Disability Sport England (DSE), but believe it was in 2006. I contacted CP Sport (for those people who have cerebral palsy) and they supplied me with the contact details of the chairman of the British Table Tennis Association of Disability who gave me the details of the DSE tournament.

Again not knowing the standard of play and expectations my friend Di, accompanied by her husband, Dave ventured to Grantham. Friday night it was strictly off the beer in preparation of the tournament. Saturday, on tournament day my nerves got the better of me and my jerks became uncontrollable and my match play was extremely poor. Saturday night was a time of relaxation and reflection and it was felt that I should have a few pints to help me to relax. Not only is the Lincolnshire ale is highly recommendable they also went down well. Believe it or not on the Sunday my game was slightly better compared to the day before!

Whilst I lost all my matches with aplomb it was equally important to get myself known on the disability table tennis scene. Di and I were talking to numerous people mentioning the struggle finding someone to coach me in Bristol who also understands disability. Through Mencap Sport I was invited to join their national England training camps as an invited guest because CP Sport at the time was advertising table tennis on their web site but were not involved with any aspect of table tennis.

A few weeks later I was back in Grantham on a disability training camp. I remember the nicest aspect of my first training camp was that everyone was making me feel so welcome regardless of my standard of play. Until recently I attended as many of those training sessions in Grantham and Crewe as possible until they have stopped due to a lack of funding, which is a big shame.

Without doubt over the years and with a big support from Mencap head coach Mick Vessey, who I have a great deal of time and admiration who could understand the nature of one's disability whilst at the same time trying to get the best out of each athlete. For a coach it is no good talking to someone with an intellectual disability words they cannot understand or demonstrating to someone with a physical disability a table tennis routine they are intellectually or physically unable to achieve because these techniques would become self-defeating. Bit by bit my game would slowly improve by putting all those jigsaw pieces into place.

It must have been around 2007 when Di felt that she has taken me as far as she can and between us we explored and discussed the various options on how to improve my game to take it to the next level. During the period 2004 to 2007 I had only met Marcus Berry a few times and felt "yes, I felt comfortable if I could work with this person". From this initial discussion with Di my next step of my table tennis journey was going to take place when I approached Marcus and requested that I could join the Civil Service Table Tennis club. This would allow me to attend their practice sessions.

I would return from my disability national training camps and would explain to Marcus the next aspect of my game Mick Vessey was keen on me to work on. Marcus was very supportive and I when time allowed would give me some of his precious time to practice those range of shots. I have a lot of time and respect for Marcus and must confess missed him when he moved to Devon to live.

At this time I was playing table tennis wherever possible, Filton College, Thornbury Table Tennis Club and Civil Service and was loving it. I started playing in the winter league in the Stroud and District league for a few seasons before moving into the Bristol and District League. The first few seasons I was losing most of my matches and again wouldn't let this deter me from playing as many league matches as possible. Whilst some of my matches I was still losing quite heavily, bit by bit I was improving. In those early league matches my nerves would get the better of me and my body muscles would tighten up and my jerks would increase, which is not a good combination when playing table tennis.

After two seasons competing in the Stroud league decided to play in the Bristol league for Filton College initially in Division 8 for Filton Typhoon. To this day I am still playing for the same team.

In my table tennis later years whilst I am winning between 25 – 33% of my league matches bit by bit my match play is changing. Various coaches have and currently working on me trying to develop and use my forehand shots in open play. For me it can be frustrating because in a coaching environment my forehand is developing nicely but currently I am unable to replicate the range of forehand shots into a league environment and believe my body muscles are quite tense and still have to develop some relaxation techniques to overcome this hurdle. This approach would not only help me in my table tennis matches but more importantly in every aspect of daily life. I also believe through table tennis is helping me to keep mobile and individuals cannot put a price on someone's mobility, freedom, whilst maintaining a good standard of life.

Currently my table tennis activities I am travelling to Maidenhead on the first Sunday of the month to join other athletes at the Southern Region table tennis squad for some coaching, which involve standing and wheelchair players. I am also in the process of developing by backhand shot and must confess in my last league match didn't go well, but it is important perseverance to develop this shot will heap rewards in the long-term. I am at that stage of my table tennis education that I am only now beginning to play some forehand shots in some of my league matches and whilst I am making far too many mistakes and losing points this is the correct approach to take because it will only be in time when those shots will become more consistent and those points I am losing in sets will start to become winning shots. Whilst this will still take time, hence the low winning percentage rate.

What are my aspirations for the future? People who have known me for many years appreciate I have a great love of all sports, but especially disability sports. I am currently the treasurer and webmaster of Bristol and South Gloucestershire Unions of disability sports and have Community Sports Level 2 qualification. I've attended the last two United Kingdom Special Olympics for those with an intellectual disability as a Bristol sports coach and enjoyed the experience.

I've found a sport that I love and currently waiting to go on a level 1 table tennis course and whilst I would be a good advocate at a grass root level I would like to encourage more people especially with a disability into table tennis, regardless of age or disability because sport should be for all people at every level. I know first-hand experience the struggle and prejudice I had to overcome to reach the standard I am currently performing and would encourage individuals to quietly battle against those odds and to prove those doubters wrong.

In time when I have some spare capacity would like to become a table tennis coaching assistance because this approach would help me enormously to learn the technical part of the game, whilst at the same time improving my own game. If funding could be found to set-up western regional disability training camps and to get more people competing at national table tennis events regardless of their standard of play.

Finally through Dennis and Wendy Beech who kindly invited me to join their national England training camps to put something back into the Special Olympics and would love to see a Western area table tennis team competing at the next United Kingdom Special Olympics in four years-time, hence the reason why I would be interested in working towards my table tennis coaching qualifications whilst promoting this sport,

Whilst these are my sporting dreams and aspirations for the future, my motto in life is 'If you haven't got a dream why get out of bed in the mornings' if you have got nothing to look forward to in life.

**Ian Thomas**