

THE **WINNING** **EDGE**

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MEDAL MAKERS

**THE TEAM BEHIND THE
PARALYMPIC HEROES**

Finding Ability In Disability
Grass-roots para table tennis coaching

Classifications
Should you coach with class in mind?

Harry's Game
The disabled coach inspiring others

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NEWS UPDATE



Opening new doors

We warmly welcomed Helen Dennett into the Disability Projects position towards the end of 2016, from where she hopes to make our sport as inclusive and welcoming as possible.

'With my mum and sisters competing internationally for Ireland I've always felt close to table tennis and loved being President of the table tennis club at the University of Liverpool.

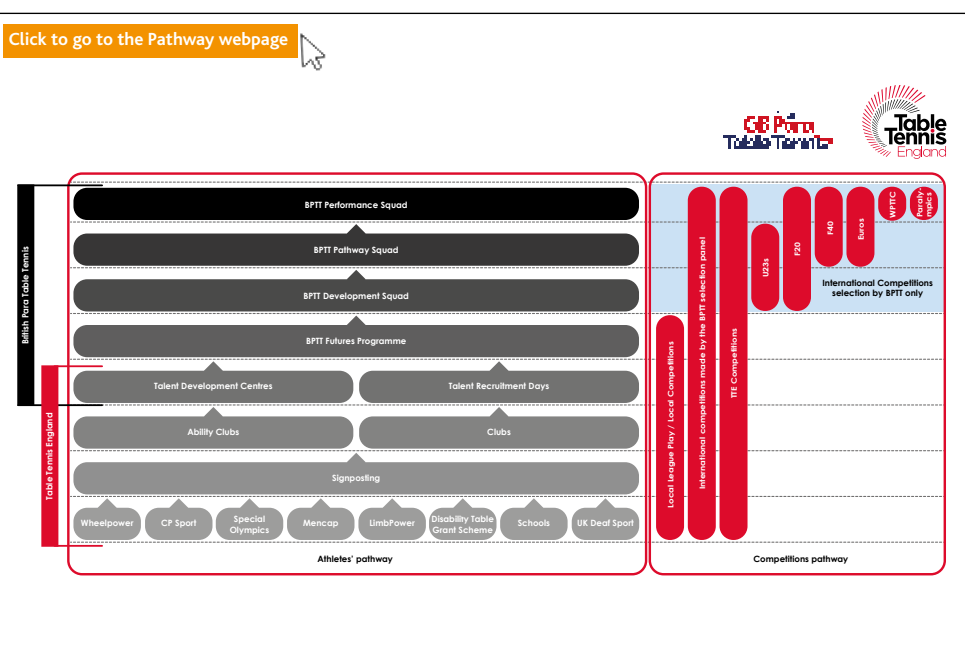
'I'm incredibly passionate about creating more opportunities for everyone to enjoy table tennis, regardless of age, disability or ability.

'I'm also working closely with British Para Table Tennis (BPTT) to ensure there's a clear pathway for any athlete with a disability wishing to progress to the Team GB squad.'

Paralympic path

Our re-launched pathway shows the route for talented players with a disability wishing to progress through to an elite level. Table Tennis England (TTE) is responsible for the grass-roots game and works hard with our current partners to develop more opportunities for players with a disability to play.

BPTT works closely with the Talent Development Centres to ensure we're hearing about the best players with a disability. They host recruitment days in conjunction with TTE, where players can attend with pathway coaches, receive feedback and tips, and meet the Futures and Development Squad.





MEDAL MAKERS

British Para Table Tennis' double gold medal-winning squad is on the rise. We find out what it takes to turn your students into Paralympic stars.



Individual athlete plans, competition plans for the year, psychology, physiotherapy, strength and conditioning. The list of tailored coaching and advice given to the British Para team is extensive. And impressive.

With UK Sport boosting their funding from £3million to £3.5m for the next four years, the challenge is for the players and staff to do everything possible to rake in even more medals at Tokyo in 2020.

'Once players arrive with us we add a lot to their training,' begins Shaun Marples, Pathway Manager at [British Para TT](#) and a key piece of the elite level set-up, linking as he does the grass-roots with the international.

Having previously worked as a regional development manager, Marples is in the ideal position to compare the attention given to players at a local level with the support they get at British Para TT. It's a vast gulf.

'The coaching sessions themselves are much more tailored towards an individual's game. [Martin Perry](#) for example, one of our Class 6 athletes, is an amputee on both arms, so he doesn't have wrist functionality.

'He's also a leg amputee from the knee so he uses a prosthetic leg. Working with Table Tennis Scotland, we were able to find Martin some support that would benefit his performance. He has a fantastic level of support back home that helps him with his prosthesis. It then took time for us to position the prosthetics so that they'd help his performance both in training and at international competitions.

'The key thing is working in partnership with his coach back home in Glasgow. Before he moved down to Sheffield, we looked at different exercises he could do that would benefit his class, and built his athlete plan to balance training, competition, and rest periods.'

More important than the physical resources available at the elite level is the time, focus and experience of the six-strong non-playing staff.

'The coaches have a great knowledge of the international game, which is really important in terms of understanding what a particular class looks and plays like around the world,' explains Marples.

'[Billy Shilton](#) for example, who is Class 8, gets access to the knowledge of the coaches and also has two teammates who are Class 8 and have valuable international experience in winning major medals.

'The athletes are in an environment here where they get that access on a daily basis – they are here



The 'here' in all this is the [English Institute of Sport](#) in Sheffield, an international standard, multi-sports training centre and the base for, among others, England Athletics, England and GB Boxing and England Basketball.

British Para TT have also called it home for the best part of a decade, but having a singular base poses the coaching staff some tricky questions, as Marples warns.

'Some players can commute here if they live close enough, but others will potentially move their entire lives to be near this training centre. We will do an extensive amount of work with the athlete before inviting people here. We want players that will buy into an elite performance culture. We will only bring players here once we believe they are ready to be here.'

'That's because we have worked hard and embedded a high-performance culture and we want future players to aspire to this.'

Finding those players whose aspirations he's keen to attract is what takes up a sizeable portion of Marples' time.

'My role as the Pathway Manager is to build strong links with the current pathway players and their personal coaches - to ensure that they are in an environment where they can excel and become better athletes. I then organise camps throughout the year where these athletes are invited to take part.'

'We've also started linking up more closely with the [Talent Development Centres](#) (TDC), to try and grow a new initiative called the Futures Programme, through which players could be working and improving without needing to be directly seen by us. Instead, we'd work with those players' coaches and clubs to develop training diaries and offer some insights around things like psychology.'

'At the development level, I observe the athletes at training camps roughly every six months to monitor their progress. There will be some focus on specific exercises based around their classification, but at development level it's more of a broader improvement we look for.'

'It's important to continue to build links between the player and their club and coach. We encourage all the pathway programme athletes to attend their club training sessions, and to work closely with their personal coaches. We are then just a phone call away if the coach would like to discuss any aspects of their athlete's game.'

Monday to Friday, with a minimum of 20 hours at a table – but they also then get expertise in other areas, like a psychologist and physiotherapy.

'That's where the individual athlete plans are very useful, so if Billy for example decides he needs to work on something specific, he's got the time and contact with the coach to do it.'

'We've also got video analysis here, which most players coming through the pathway programme haven't had much access to before, so they can see themselves playing, which is a really useful aid for both athlete and coach.'

Think you might be coaching the next [Rob Davies](#) or [Will Bayley](#)?

Contact Shaun Marples at:

smarples.bttad@gmail.com or on 07944776751.

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FINDING ABILITY IN DISABILITY



Can anything stop you making a go of table tennis? Not for one coach in Sheffield, who's introduced the game to blind people, paralysed people and everyone in between.



Minutes before I meet Shaun Alvey at the English Institute of Sport, close to the Albert Table Tennis Centre where he's based, he's involved in a confrontation which reveals much of what has made him an outstandingly successful coach of disabled players.

'I was standing near some students who had seen Martin Perry walk past,' Alvey recalls, referring to the British Para international and triple amputee.

'They were talking about his arms, about how he had no hands. I interrupted them and said: "Yeah, but do you realise he's one of the best para table tennis players in the world?" They were blown away.

'They'd only seen his disability, not his potential. That's a problem beyond table tennis, but it's a part of what holds some coaches back.'

No coach would admit to narrowing a player's field of vision because of a disability, but what Alvey argues is that it's not a deliberate attempt to restrict an athlete, it's a mindset born from the desire to do what they think is best for that individual.

'Personally, I find it best to get rid of the first three letters and focus on the final seven: ability. Everyone has that, but often people will look at the "dis" part first.

'I make sure that when someone comes through the door in a wheelchair, for example, I don't judge them on that. I remove any perception of disability at all. I just class them as someone who wants to come and play the sport.

'I think it's a case of coaches embracing the enjoyment of just getting someone through the door and involved, having a go. So when someone comes, or rings or emails, and asks about the different sessions we have, I don't address any question of their physical or mental capabilities, I just say "come and have a go".'

When it feels appropriate, Alvey will chat about the disability, but does it openly and with no sense of it being a battle to overcome. 'I speak to the person I coach first, then make an assessment in my own mind, or approach a parent or carer, and discuss any disabilities.'

David Wetherill, now an established British Para Table Tennis international, backed up Alvey when he recalled his experience starting out in the sport.

'Inclusion was really important for me at the start. Treating me just as you treat everyone else. I wanted almost the opposite of discrimination: to be talked to and mixed with like the rest of the players at the club. At the same time, coaches need to understand that we might struggle with certain aspects of the game but that can be overcome without making it into a big deal.'



“All you need a participant to be able to do is hit the ball back from a bounce feed and you can take it from there.”

© Action Images

What helps is that Alvey has the confidence and experience of knowing that wherever that conversation goes, he can handle the challenge it throws up and his club's facilities can see to almost any player's needs.

'We need to work hard as a sport to get our facilities to the state where participants don't need to check which sessions they can and can't get to.

'From a coaching point of view, we just need more people coming through that door who we can help. Anything that stops someone doing that is also the thing that's stopping us from doing our job properly.'

When it comes to coaching one-on-one with a disabled player, there is no one secret tool or insight Alvey has to offer, just patience and knowledge.

'All you need a participant to be able to do is hit the ball back from a bounce feed and you can take it from there. For some people, new to a session and playing with a disability, that in itself is an achievement.

'That doesn't make it any less of a success for the coach – you can see from the smile on their faces, from their reaction, that you've made a breakthrough.

'I've worked with people who can't balance a ball on a bat to begin with, but within weeks they are blocking the ball back to me even when I rip it at them as hard as I can.

'A lot of coaches feel under pressure to make something happen for people, quickly. Instead, with many disabled players, starting them off in social sessions is a better approach. Let them come and enjoy the game and have fun, then once they're happy on that level you can talk to them about coming to coaching sessions.'

**[HTTPS://VIMEO.
COM/148799780](https://vimeo.com/148799780)**



Top tips for coaching disabled players

Shaun Alvey, *Inclusive Ping Pong*

- Make it accessible.
- Make it fun.
- Make it exciting.
- Make it affordable.

WE

RESPONDING TO THE DISABILITY CHALLENGE

Each disability will bring its own challenge. It goes without saying that no two are the same. Yet para table tennis, like most disabled sports, puts players into classifications based on their physical and mental capabilities. Later, we discuss when to introduce classifications to your players, but first Shaun Alvey from Inclusive Ping Pong and British Para Table Tennis coach Shaun Marples suggest ideas for working with players of any classification – and none.





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At grassroots level, classification specifics should be the last thing on a coach's mind. Instead, consider different ways of working with a given disability. Shaun Alvey recalls three very different sessions working with three very different disabilities

VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

"USE THE ROBOT"

'I did one session and there was a boy there who was blind and was asked to sit it out. But I said, "no, we can still get him involved". So we got a robot, asked him to listen to the clicking sound it makes when the ball is released, and through that he could develop a timing point, with the help of someone sitting to the side of the table. He was able, by the end of the session, to do 60 seconds without missing a ball. So that's someone playing a sport where there isn't even a classification allowing him to compete!'

WHEELCHAIR USERS

"INCREASE THE SERVE OPTIONS"

The serve takes on added importance when your mobility is limited, as it ultimately will be with a wheelchair athlete. With this in mind, Alvey suggests working on the speed and variety of the serve.

'To practise those vital, long, fast topspin serves – and focus on attacking the third ball – ask the player to aim for the crossover point of their playing partner, concentrating on good speed off the paddle. Then, when the ball is returned, I get the server to attempt a topspin return with an intention to win the point. On the next serve, repeat these steps with the third ball attack being to the side that wasn't attacked the previous point.'

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

"DITCH THE NET"

'When you're working with someone with a learning difficulty they also often have poor hand-to-eye coordination skills, but air hockey is fine for them. So you turn the table tennis table into an air hockey table, which allows them to develop their coordination from a lower starting point. From there you leave the net off and give them bounce feeds, asking them to keep the bat between chin and belly button, with you putting the ball to where that bat is. All of a sudden their confidence is going sky-high, you put the net back on and they can hit it back to you. You've broken down the problem of the net and a fear from the player that it is too great a barrier for them.'

At the high-performance level, attention to detail becomes essential. Shaun Marples gives two examples of players he's seen improve, and how.

KIM DAYBELL

"STUDY HOW THE DISABILITY IMPACTS THEIR GAME"

'We have [Kim Daybell](#) (right) on the Para GB team who is on the border between Classes 9 and 10. We've looked a lot at his disability, which includes limited pectoral muscles, and played around with his forehand to try and compensate. To begin with, he would fall out of the forehand and leave himself in a lobbing position, which we couldn't afford. So we worked on getting his trunk more involved, so he was pushing through onto his right side – he's left handed – so his body maintained its position close to the table.'



DAVID WETHERILL

"CONSTANTLY TALK AND ASSESS"

As Marples points out below, severe impairments highlight the importance of a strong, flexible relationship between player and coach.

'The coach-athlete relationship here has to revolve around their classification, how that's looking internationally, and their disability, how they are looking to adapt their game to work with it. These adaptations might work or they might not, but having a relationship where coach and athlete are constantly talking and assessing is what we want. That comes from spending time together and spending time at the table, getting a low player-to-coach ratio. That's where the individual athlete plan comes into it, so if [David Wetherill](#) (left, a class 6 player) for example decides he needs to work on something specific, he's got the time and contact with the coach to do it.'

WHEN TO CLASSIFY

A problem many grass-roots coaches will come across is questions over classification. Whether it comes from worried parents or eager players, they often want to know where they or their child falls. Despite our breaking down of the classes, the recommendation to most coaches is to encourage players not to obsess over it.

This is firstly because the method of getting someone classified is arduous at best. There is currently nobody in the UK who can make an official decision on it, with many British Para players travelling to Hungary to complete the process. But that verdict is far from final, as Shaun Alvey explains.

'I don't look at classifications at first, only when you get to competition level, and even then you get different criteria: the [Special Olympics](#) for example has a different set of classifications than TTE.'

Alvey also touches on the second, more immediate, reason why players shouldn't be worried about classification: it only becomes a factor in competitions. And, currently, para competitions on a local level are almost non-existent and are rare even nationally.

British Para Table Tennis coach Shaun Marples is clear that, despite its necessity at elite level, coaches should hold off on classification discussions. 'Even when we go and play in competitions players worry about what classification they'll fall into.

'That's really unhelpful because they need to just concentrate on improving their game and get used to competing. The only classification discussion that could go ahead early on is whether they would be categorised at all.'

As Alvey puts it: 'Let's get people playing the sport first. Classifications can come into it later.'

While discouraging coaches from progressing the classification discussion with players, Marples explains that having grass-roots coaches clued-up on classifications can make his life as a pathway and development coach far easier.

'We focus on 10 classifications at British Para, with an 11th for learning disabilities. It'd be useful for us to get to the situation where coaches can approach the pathway programme and be able to say: "We've got a Class 7 girl who's really promising".

'At the moment it tends to be a coach saying, "we've got a disabled girl here", well, what is her disability? "I'm not actually sure." If coaches have a level of education and awareness that would be really helpful. It is certainly the case that we'd suggest different drills and exercises for a Class 3 athlete than a Class 6.'

Official classification for the British Para Table Tennis squad are done only when an athlete reaches international level. Prior to this official classification is not necessary.

CLASSIFICATION BREAKDOWN



PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT - SITTING CLASSES 1 - 5

- CLASS 1** Players have no sitting balance and a severely affected playing arm.
- CLASS 2** Players have no sitting balance, but their playing arm is less affected than described in Class 1.
- CLASS 3** Players have no trunk control, yet their arms are minimally affected by the impairment
- CLASS 4** Players have fair sitting balance, and fully functional arms and hands.
- CLASS 5** Players have normal sitting balance, arm and hand function.



PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT - STANDING CLASSES 6 - 10

- CLASS 6** Players have severe impairments in both their arms and legs.
- CLASS 7** Players have a severe impairment of the legs or the playing arm, but less severe than those described in Class 6.
- CLASS 8** Players have a moderate impairment of the legs or a moderately affected playing arm compete in this class.
- CLASS 9** Players have a mild impairment that affects the legs or playing arm.
- CLASS 10** Players have minimal or mild impairments in legs or playing arm.



INTELLECTUAL IMPAIRMENT

- CLASS 11** Players have a intellectual impairment with an IQ below 75.

VIDEO;
[HTTPS://WWW.](https://www.youtube.com/)
[TUBE.COM/](https://www.youtube.com/)



FURTHER INFORMATION

[BRITISH PARA TABLE TENNIS' DOWNLOADABLE CLASSIFICATION LIST](#)

[THE INTERNATIONAL PARALYMPIC COMMITTEE'S BREAKDOWN OF CLASSIFICATIONS](#)



HARRY'S GAME

Richard Jones meets an outstanding coach and award-winning athlete. He also happens to have Down's syndrome.



Harry Fairchild is a bit of a local celebrity in Brighton. A talented actor, dancer and musician, he has worked as a professional Makaton sign language teacher at St Luke's Primary School for over three years.

However, table tennis is Fairchild's real passion. He has been part of the Brighton Table Tennis Club (BTTC) coaching team for a year and in 2016 he passed his Level 1 coaching course to become the UK's first qualified table tennis coach with Down's syndrome.

The demanding three-month course included a practical assessment of delivering table tennis skills to a group of children, as well as a whole host of written work.

But Fairchild took it all in his stride: 'I had help from my coaches and other friends on my course,' he says.

'People helped me learn it. I had help with writing. There was a lot of writing! I had to work hard. I did good listening too. I liked practicing and telling people what to do.

'I am best at helping people play table tennis. I make the players feel good and they like me being a coach. I think I coach children best and they love me a lot.'

Fairchild has represented the club at the [Malmo Open](#), one of the biggest disability sporting events outside of the Paralympic Games.

And despite going down the coaching career path, he is still a very ambitious player. As he puts it: 'I am a coach and a player.'

Tim Holtam, BTTC Director and founder thinks Harry is a great role model for his club and the sport.

'Table tennis is lucky he has decided to focus his boundless energy on the sport.

'He plays between three and five hours, six days a week, and his passion for the sport and support for others make a great contribution to the club.

'He is also an outstanding player with a great future ahead of him and was last year crowned UK table tennis champion at the Special Olympics national competition as the highest finisher with Down's syndrome.'



It is fun. You can be a coach too. I will help you to play and to be a coach like me. We are very very good at it. If you don't have Down's syndrome you can play too.



**[HTTPS://YOUTU.
BE/UPZSINTQEO](https://youtu.be/UPZSINTQEO)**





© Brighton Table Tennis Club

Fairchild's top three tips for coaches

- Respect each other.
- Move a lot, move your feet a lot.
- Be kind and have fun.

The inspirational Fairchild isn't the only success story coming out of **BTTC**, which was named Table Tennis England's National Club of the Year in 2014. Last May it was named the first Club of Sanctuary in the UK for its recent work supporting unaccompanied refugee children.

Since it was founded nine years ago by keen ex-international players Tim Holtam and Harry McCarney, it has grown from a club with a couple of broken old tables at Brighton Youth Centre to become one of the country's biggest table tennis clubs.

It now oversees over 100 tables across the south-coast city, with more than a thousand people playing the sport via the club each year, including students from over 10 local schools.

The club ran a Level 1 coaching course last spring, featuring perhaps the most diverse line up of coaches from all walks of life that has ever been put together.

Among the candidates joining Fairchild were an ex-professional Portuguese coach, formerly of Benfica, the Chairman of the Brighton league, a young woman who lives in a care home for people with Asperger's, an Afghani refugee in foster care, and one of the top 20 female players in England.

'We are realising that table tennis really is for everyone,' Holtam adds.

'The benefits to older people, the benefits to community building and the huge range of interesting people from all walks of life that have got involved in Brighton Table Tennis Club have been inspiring.'

Last July, BTTC launched a monthly session for people with Down's syndrome. Poster boy Fairchild, whose beaming smile and enthusiasm for the sport epitomises all the club has achieved and is working towards, is a key part of the coaching team.

Fairchild hopes that he will be the first of many people with Down's syndrome to become a coach.

'I have Down's syndrome. I want people like me to play table tennis,' he says.

Fairchild clearly loves his sport and his club, and even answers his home phone in Woodingdean with: 'Hello Brighton Table Tennis Club, how can I help you?'

And although there will be plenty of support for him along the way, he is happy to lead the way in the new sessions.

Fairchild has been given a formidable nickname by his peers at BTTC.

'The other coaches at the club call me "Boss" because I am a "Big Boss" now.'

I want to get more players in. More players with Down's syndrome especially. Playing table tennis is my best thing. I feel good when I play. I play well. I want to win for my dad.

The success of Brighton's inclusive Level 1 course last spring has seen another planned for 2017, with diversity again being an outstanding feature.

Last year, Harry Fairchild became the UK's first Level 1 graduate with Down's syndrome, but he will soon be joined by three other coaches with the learning disability, including Chris O'Flinn (right).

'It's like thunder and lightning in my head,' O'Flinn explains of his Down's syndrome experience, one which has been improved by his participation at Brighton Table Tennis Club (BTTC).

'BTTC have taught me how to feel good about myself. I am a multi-tasker now – I know I can carry on. I'm always healthy and realise the benefits of looking after my body. Eat well and take sport – it will all help you.

'Everyone there has become my family – I'm a new man because of it. They are my future and I would never leave them. They have shown me the way to get through my situation.'

Now O'Flinn is moving into the coaching sphere, his priorities are changing towards helping others get the most out of the sport.

'This is a big motivation for me. I could teach young kids, other adults with learning disabilities and the golden oldies in the future.

'You see, I don't see myself as disabled any more. I feel fit, strong, powerful and successful through achieving in table tennis.'



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**[HTTPS://YOUTU.
BE/1X070-I4YXG](https://youtu.be/1X070-I4YXG)**



A coach needs to tailor their words into language that can be understood. Get to know your players and get to know how they communicate. There is not a one size fits all solution and each individual is unique.

Tim Holtam - BTTC coach

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