

Jane Leigh – Women & Girls Ambassador

Theme: Women & Girls / Mental Wellbeing / Individual development

Since moving to Cornwall, I've been more aware of the lack of opportunities for female players, and I'm keen to change that situation. I see no reason why there should be fewer opportunities for women and girls who want to play, and think positive discrimination is needed to ensure we do something to level the playing field.

I first played table tennis at a youth club when I was about 12 [...] Ten or so years later I started playing at lunchtime when I worked on a magazine in London, and we discovered a table in the basement of the office. That was good fun, and when I got a job on a local paper in Lincolnshire, I took it a bit more seriously and graduated to league play.

After that work and family took over, we moved to Devon, Gloucestershire, Australia and back to Glos, and it was a few decades before I started up again, playing in the Stroud and Gloucestershire leagues. I'd never had any coaching but saw there were opportunities to gain a coaching qualification so eight of us got together to ask if a Level 1 course could be put on locally. I completed that in 2015 and continued playing, whilst also coaching at a local club, helping at county junior squad sessions and running an over-50s session.

From there I moved to Cornwall It was back to square one for me, as I knew nobody in the county, and one of the first things I did was go to a local club. Unfortunately when I asked about playing league I was told 'not many women play down here', which made me determined to do just that.

I went to a different club who asked if I'd play for them, and that started my Cornish career. I've gone on to run a ladies-only Bat n Chat session which, before lockdown, attracted up to 18 players per session, then a mixed Return 2 Play session. I also set up my own ladies' session in the village where I live.

One aspect of doing the coaching courses was to learn a recommended way of guiding players, and to work out for myself how I could improve. My over-50s groups were a great learning experience as I worked with people at all levels of ability, and with different motivation for playing.



My work running a Bat n Chat session showed that there was a demand for a female-only session, and I'm keen to see that continue and to facilitate more women and girls taking part in the sport.

I've been supported by Table Tennis England in achieving some of my goals, enabling me to run Bat n Chat, for example. I have faced challenges, including a reluctance from some quarters to let me run sessions, and I'm delighted to have overcome those with the backing of the venue where I run classes.

What's next on my table tennis journey? I think my playing career is declining somewhat, partly due to age and injury, but I've been enjoying seeing people improve as a result of my coaching and hope my journey will continue with the emphasis on coaching rather than competition. I'll be very happy if I can carry on helping others fulfil their potential.

I see no reason why table tennis shouldn't be inclusive, but I've seen a large variation in provision for female players around the country.

I think the onus is on individual clubs to encourage female players: that doesn't need to be by anything other than welcoming those who turn up, ensuring they don't spend ages waiting to play, and letting them play the top players occasionally. Some seem to think women need refreshments and music to function: what we actually want is to be provided with opportunities to play, to be allowed to have fun, and to receive coaching if we want it.

Running a female-only session has shown me that some do prefer to play in an all-female environment. The reasons are many and varied – perception of safety, cultural issues, lack of confidence are just a few – but these are valid reasons and need to be respected.

I try to treat my players as I'd like to be treated, and that means taking things at their pace and maybe getting every detail right before moving on. Not everyone is going to want to be a league player but building confidence and providing a social outlet are integral parts of a session, along with perfecting technique and practising match play.

Within the sport I enjoy the different elements of competition and exercise, and the challenge of trying to out-think an opponent. I feel that has a bearing on my coaching work as I think I'm getting better at understanding what other people need to do to improve.

Table-tennis has impacted me hugely, particularly in terms of health and wellbeing. I've been a journalist most of my life, freelance for over 25 years, but over the last five years or so paid work has been dying, and the job was pretty well killed off by lockdown. That robbed me of my income and, perhaps more importantly, my identity.

Once lockdown was relaxed, being able to start up again and pick up my table tennis work gave me an identity once more and the motivation to keep going. It's also given me an outlet for activity and socialising, but has, I think, been most valuable in terms of restoring my faith in my own value as a contributor to society.

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Gaining my coaching qualifications has further enhanced my role as the Level 2 course, in particular, has shown me new ways of imparting information so that the players work out for themselves what they need to do. And there's great satisfaction in having a lasting impact on a player's game.

FE: "When I moved to this area, the first year was spent sorting out the house and garden, and then six months were governed by Covid-19. I live on my own and didn't know anyone in this area, so there were weeks I hadn't spoken with anyone face to face: that all changed thanks to Bat n Chat - it allowed me to laugh again."

LP: "Bat n Chat has been amazing. Personally, my game has improved; it has lightened my spirits after a serious illness, as well as helping me form new friendships. The exercise and the companionship of so many other local women coming together is a credit to Jane who has taught us and provided the space to play."

LD: "This was a sport I'd never played before and I've found I really love it. Jane is patient, informative and has a wicked sense of humour which means I enjoy it on so many levels. It has made this pandemic so much more liveable. Thank you TTE for facilitating this."

LSJ: "Bat 'n Chat is thoroughly enjoyable because: individual coaching is available for everyone during the sessions; it's a good laugh; there are opportunities to play with several players in each session; and it's a great way to meet new people."

'Jane was the first coach at Cheltenham over-50s sessions, helping beginners and seasoned players to improve. Her enthusiasm motivated us all to enjoy and sharpen our techniques and tactics. Jane's coaching has been instrumental in teaching skills which have enabled me to progress, and five years on I can still hear her instructions when I'm facing an opponent: 'Serve short' is forever registered in my memory banks!

As for advice, I'd say just get stuck in. Finding a club that suits you can take a while so be prepared to visit several venues and see which one suits you best. I think it certainly helps to get some coaching at the beginning of your table-tennis journey so I'd suggest try to find a coach you get on with, and who understands your aims, and stick with them. A lot of players may try to advise you but it's important to listen to one person you trust and follow what they say.

