



How Banbury became a booming table tennis league

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Five years ago the future of Banbury and District Table Tennis Association (B&DTTA) looked bleak – numbers were dwindling and it had a real dearth of young talent coming through.

The association knew it needed a plan to attract youngsters and entice older players back into the game, and so a project team was set up to tackle the problem.

After contacting Table Tennis England for assistance, two regional development officers from the National Governing Body joined the project team, and a scheme was launched to get clubs linked to local primary schools, creating a pathway for junior player development, with a new focus on coaching.

The plan was to start with table tennis taster sessions in schools and develop these into regular coaching sessions at lunchtime and after-school clubs. These coaching sessions would then help feed players into the top of the pathway – the League Coaching Academy – which would develop the skills of players at a competitive level to take them through to local league ability and, for some, County or national representation.

Alongside this, pay-and-play schemes were launched to attract adults. Both schemes aimed to attract new players by initially using a fun and social approach.

Barry Hook, League Secretary, at B&DTTA, explained more.

How did you manage to engage with schools so successfully?

Engaging with our primary schools was a really key aspect to grow young people in the game locally, because we know schools are the way to reach the kids and their parents.

What made it successful was the real drive that was coming from the people that were leading our project.

We got information and guidance from Table Tennis England about what we should be pushing to schools and the types of information we could be giving to them on how we could work with them and benefit them.

Eric Barlow, Coaching and Development Officer, and Robin Aston, our late chairmen, went out to visit schools personally. We didn't send a letter, we used a personal touch by going out and spending time with schools and the head teachers. We also avoided promising the world, and talked about doing things on a gradual basis.

The key messages were around showing the benefits the sport can bring – you can play it any age, everyone has pretty much picked up a bat, and you can play it with anyone – your parents, friends, on holiday.

Once we were in, we made sure we demonstrated the fun aspect of the sport, and the social aspect, before moving players on to the league and competitive environment. This was the same approach for adults as well.

How has your table tennis activity grown as a result?

Previously we had minimal coaching at a couple of our clubs and only a handful of children playing there, but we now have 20–30 children here every Friday night and we work with four to five schools that have up to 70 kids playing table tennis every week.

Not all of these children are playing in the league right now, and a lot of them are very young, but we've still seen a growth in the number of teams over the last couple of years and have added a few extra teams.

As the children get older, we will look to add at least another division too.

We currently have 50 young children in our graded competition and we have entered teams into the National Cadet League in the last two years, which is something we'd never done before. They are all performing really well there.

What importance has coaching played in the academy's success?

A good coach is absolutely key to what we require here.

For the first two years we ran the academy with a local coach and we achieved what we wanted to, but to really move on we needed to employ a full time, professional coach.

Table Tennis England worked on this with us and helped us source Level 3 qualified coach Eddie Rooft, who has been with us ever since.

The children really respect him. As well as teaching them the basics of the game from an early age, he teaches them the right values and ethics and how to behave.

How did you tap into the guidance and expertise of Table Tennis England?

We are all volunteers here and sometimes you need professional advice and guidance, which is where Table Tennis England came in.

At the very start, we knew what we wanted to achieve as an association, but Table Tennis England were great at getting us to understand how we wanted to achieve it, the timelines around that and helping us put a proper project plan in place, rather than just a 'finger in the air' idea.

They also helped us with how to source funding and submit grant applications, and thanks to generous donations from local charities and sponsors, we grew our academy from seven tables to 15.

As well as their development officers helping us with lots of guidance, assistance and direction, they're also a point of contact, particularly for things like welfare.

They have the resource, the knowledge, and the ability to help us and point us in the right direction.

They can give us advice on ensuring we are following best practice and we are meeting all the regulations we should be.

How has it transformed table tennis in the area?

It's reinvigorated it and given it some youth and some enthusiasm again.

Like a lot of leagues, our age group was ever increasing. We hold a finals night every year and it was the same players playing every year – the veterans and the super veterans – but now we are seeing under-11s, 13s, 15s, and 17s playing, and in front of a lot of people.

We've seen attendance and entries to tournaments starting to increase and we're also seeing parents becoming more involved in coaching and the administration side of things. There's new ideas and a new energy to the league.

Our adult players are invigorated as well because they're seeing youngsters playing the game.

We've also had a growth in adults. We're seeing players coming back and renewing old friendships with people they haven't seen for 10 years and we're also seeing adults taking it up for the first time at 50.

We've found that a lot of older adults have stopped playing other sports because of age or injury, and are now turning to table tennis for both fitness and socialising. They see we have a lot of older players still playing and that it is a game that you can play all your life.

What does the future look like?

Our future looks a lot better than it did five years ago. There's still lots of work to be done, but we've now got lots of young children who are really enjoying playing the game at all different standards. Some of them will go on to be really good players, others will go on to be club players only, but they will all enjoy the game.

As an association, we can now see that we have a roadmap, we have a future and we have a vision, and hopefully the number of clubs will increase.

We can see the league and the clubs are developing and we have a future for a number of years to come.

Without the help of Table Tennis England and the drive of some of our committee members we would never have got to this point. They have been very proactive and without them, we would have been swimming against the tide.

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