



Bat & Chat a big hit in Cornwall

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The first Bat & Chat session in Cornwall has proved to be a smash hit with its target audience.

The session, run by Mylor Bridge table tennis coach Jane Leigh, was set up with a grant from the Table Tennis England Be TT initiative to encourage female players either to try the sport for the first time or to pick up a bat again. The first 10 weeks, before the coronavirus lockdown, attracted up to 18 players a time.

Jane said: "I moved to Cornwall in late 2018, leaving behind the over-50s sessions that I ran in Gloucester and Cheltenham, and I was looking for opportunities to set up something similar down here. With the help of a grant from Be TT, I started the all-female sessions in January of this year, and have been delighted with the response from players of all ages.

"I've signed up an assistant, Cora Stocker, who helps run the sessions and I think we're both enjoying Bat & Chat as much as all the players are. Certainly it's helped me settle in to the area, meet a lot more people and feel that I'm contributing to the community."

The sessions are held at the Dracaena Community Centre in Falmouth and have been attracting an average of 15 players each week. Players range in age from 27 to 69, and from complete beginners to those who've played in the past.

Run as part of Table Tennis England's Women & Girls programme, the activity aims to give female players the chance to socialise, try the sport and get active in a friendly relaxed environment. All equipment is provided (with Falmouth Docks Table Tennis Club kindly allowing the use of their tables and nets) so players just need trainers and enthusiasm.

Jane added: "It's a Thursday afternoon session, to encourage people who might not have chance to come and play at a club in the evening, and I've been impressed by how everyone's fitted in. The sessions are good fun, there's a lot of laughter and chat, but also some quality play and a lot of enthusiasm for coaching to help everyone improve."

At 27, Charlotte, is the youngest player in the group. She said: "Bat & Chat is a brilliant space for women of all ages to get together and play table tennis, without pressure to do anything other than have fun. I feel it offers a place for women, specifically, to explore the sport in their own way, and it's also a great opportunity to meet people from all over the local community."

Ros, 68, drives from near St Austell to attend Bat & Chat, a 42-mile round trip. She said: "I thoroughly enjoy the sessions with the ladies. There is no pressure put upon us but Jane and Cora are very good at teaching and making it fun."



A player takes part in one of the skills games (picture by Charlotte Lake)

Jenny added: "Bat & Chat is the highlight of my week. I am active with open water swimming and yoga, but I really enjoy my new pastime, table tennis. I've lived here for nine years but met a totally new set of people through these sessions. Being self employed, getting out to do something completely different is mentally and socially stimulating, and it's great to mix with such a cross section of ages and backgrounds. The coaches are great, and I really feel I am improving which adds to the enjoyment."

Each session is planned to offer regular features – a drill to start with, and a skills game to finish, for example – while everyone changes partners every 10 minutes, to ensure a good variety of play.

Jane said: "Cora and I are on hand to answer questions and offer suggestions on how to improve, and we also try to add something new to keep players engaged."

"We set up a multi-ball corner for one session, where everyone could have a go at more intense training: that was very popular and will be coming back."

At the moment the sessions are on hold while the coronavirus outbreak runs its course, but Jane hopes Bat & Chat will be back as soon as possible. A couple of the players had also started attending Saturday morning training sessions at Falmouth Docks TTC.

Jane said: "This has got off to a great start, and I'm hoping it might lead on to more table tennis sessions for the community. The players who've already tried it are keen to keep going and I have thoughts of running a tournament and maybe putting on a mixed session as well.

"I couldn't have done it without the help of Falmouth Docks TTC who have let me use their equipment, the West Cornwall TT League who are acting as my financial backers, the Dracaena Centre who helped me with the grant application and with discounted hall hire, and to Be TT who gave me the grant.

"Thank you to all of them for playing a part in encouraging female participation in this great game."

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