



Para ace Dan is giving plenty back to the sport

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When Dan Bullen talks about giving something back to the sport which has taken him from beginner to challenging for Paralympics selection, he is not doing things by halves.

The 22-year-old from St Neots in Cambridgeshire is part of the British Para Table Tennis Pathway squad, with the Paris 2024 Paralympics his target.

But he wears a number of other hats, having passed Level 1 qualifications in umpiring and coaching and become a TT Kidz Activator.

A Level 1 referee's qualification is under way, and Level 2 qualifications in umpiring and coaching are also in the pipeline.

As well as competing at the Mark Bates Ltd National Championships before the lockdown – he was **narrowly beaten in the Para Class 3-5 final** by Rio Paralympian Jack Hunter-Spivey – Dan also umpired a number of matches, including on the show court.

He is due to be tournament referee at a 1* event at St Neots TTC in the autumn, the same club where he led the TT Kidz sessions which are also temporarily on hold during the coronavirus pandemic.

"Table tennis has given so much to me over the years," said Dan. "Before I played table tennis, I couldn't catch a ball or sit up straight in my wheelchair. It took me a year to get the ball back over the net.

"So I wanted to give something back to the sport and hope I could find people who it could help, like it helped me.

"Obviously, my playing comes first, but if I'm not playing I'm happy to do anything to help.

"It's giving back to the sport and if we want the sport to continue, everyone needs to give back in some way."



Dan with coach Mark Mitchell at the Nationals

Dan has been playing since the age of 10 and has been under the guidance of St Neots coach Mark Mitchell, who he says has helped and mentored him while he has taken his qualifications.

“I did the Level 1 coaching first – I had to do a session on forehand drive at St Neots TTC,” said Dan. “It’s helped me as a player as well and helped me understand the shots and the game more.”

TT Kidz, the eight-week starter course aimed at seven-to-11-year-olds, came next and Dan says he “sort of got roped in” when Table Tennis England Development and Volunteer Officer Colette Gooding visited the club to provide training and help get the sessions going.

He says he has learned to adapt his communication skills to help get messages across to youngsters who have had no previous exposure to table tennis, and added: “It’s good to get the kids involved. Maybe it (the course) needs to be a bit longer because we couldn’t cover everything, but quite a few have joined the club, which is great and made it worth doing.”

As for umpiring, his first major tournament came at the Mark Bates Ltd Nationals in Nottingham from February 28 to March 1, and there is the possibility of umpiring at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham – providing of course that there is no wheelchair class in a table tennis competition which will once again feature para events, as it did at the Gold Coast in 2018, where there was a standing class.

Dan said: “It was different umpiring the Nationals because I felt a lot more pressure to make the right decisions. I felt the pressure more umpiring than when I was playing, especially on the show court.

“For the Commonwealth Games, it depends whether they have a para event I can play in, or not. It would be a great experience to have in your own country, but I’d rather be playing – nothing trumps playing.”

Dan is grateful for the support he has had from his club and also staff at Table Tennis England and British Para Table Tennis.

He said: “I’ve had good support from Table Tennis England with umpiring and coaching and also from BPTT with

playing.

“Alex Mercer and Chris Newton at Table Tennis England have been very supportive with helping me to get the umpiring qualification, and they checked if I needed anything, like a bigger umpires’ table and stuff like that. Colette really helped me with TT Kidz as well.”

Lockdown has temporarily halted normal table tennis activity, but Dan has been working on his game at home, under guidance from BPTT coach Shaun Marples.

He said: “My targets are playing – I want to break into the main GB squad, which is going to be harder now that Tokyo has been moved because the squad is going to be together for longer and then it’s only three years to qualify for Paris.

“I’ve got my robot in the garden when it’s not too windy, and we’re having Skype calls with Shaun and the coaches to make sure we’re all okay. It’s nice to see everybody on those. They are supporting me big-time with that but it’s frustrating that we can’t go out and play, especially after my good performance at the Nationals.”

Dan is sure to find plenty of opportunity to get back into table tennis, across multiple areas of the sport, as life returns to something like normality in the months ahead.

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