



## 'Table tennis gave me a place to belong'

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Lyndsey Simpson is a 23-year-old table tennis player, coach and umpire and a member at Blackpool TTC. She has experienced mental health issues and says table tennis has been a huge help as she has fought to overcome them. Here, she shares her story.

I began playing table tennis aged around six. My brother already played and I think they were looking for new players, so that's how I got involved. I loved it, I went to training every week, I would be ready super early and used to enjoy competing although I wasn't very good.

However, due to other sporting commitments and as I was better at those sports, I stopped playing completely around the age of 11 and I didn't play at all for about five years.

I went back to table tennis around the time of my 16th birthday. I had stopped playing my other sports and out of them all I really missed table tennis so I thought I would give it another go. I started in the beginners' sessions and within a few weeks I was back in the main session and I began helping assist the coaches in the beginner session.

However, about six months after my 16th birthday I had a mental breakdown and was diagnosed with OCD, and did experience suicidal thoughts. Just to explain a little as it will help later, I had battled with mental health problems knowingly since the age of 12, when I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression but they never picked up on my OCD.

I literally had no friends, I had my Mum, Dad, brother and his partner and that was it. My OCD behaviours were very visible and people were quick to judge me and think I was weird when actually I was fighting my breakdown every single day.

For a period of time the only thing I would leave the house for was table tennis. During a time in my life where I didn't feel like I fitted in anywhere, Blackpool TTC gave me somewhere that I could belong. I really don't know if they know that, either.

Brian Jackson specifically quickly became a role model and someone I looked up to and I still do even though we're good friends now. His kindness, good heart and humour helped me to feel 'normal' – at table tennis I didn't feel like I was living in my head all the time, it was my only outlet. It was a couple of hours of every week that I could feel just like every other 16 year old rather than the girl that had OCD thoughts every minute of every day.

Brian almost took me under his wing and encouraged me to explore the other areas of table tennis aside from the playing. I did my County Umpire badge and only three weeks after passing I went to Sainsburys School Games 2013 in Sheffield which was my first time away from home, away from my parents and I still wasn't receiving any treatment for my breakdown or OCD, so this was huge!

I nearly went home the same night we arrived, I can't remember any other time I have been so scared. But Brian was my umpiring partner and all the other umpires were so welcoming and kind. I was just another umpire to them, they didn't judge me, they didn't look down on me despite my ways. That weekend will always go down as a massive achievement for me and it was the table tennis community that held me up, kept me going and believed in me.

Additionally, the club funded my Level One coaching course and I passed. Since then, I've joined the local league and now captain my team, I help out at the local tournaments we run on the desk, setting up and taking down, I have been on the league committee for a number of years and in my current role of Social Secretary for around five or six years. I also met my boyfriend in the league as well, we've been together six years this year.

Most recently, I passed my Tournament Referee paper and in January I refereed my first ever event at Jack Petchey Teams in London, with help from Brian, Alex and Margot.

We are very lucky at Blackpool TTC to have the people we do collectively running the club and the local league, as a team we are great!

I have met some lifelong friends in table tennis, people that I would refer to more as family than friends. I will never be able to give back as much as table tennis has given me. But, as a female, in a male dominated league and male dominated sport I never feel any different, I don't arrive to matches feeling as though the opponent is going any easier on me because I am a girl, whereas I have experienced this in my other sports.

It's a community that is so loving, joyous and caring that your gender, race, sexuality, disabilities or just being a bit different doesn't matter. You can literally be yourself and that is absolutely okay.

One thing for sure, I don't know where I would be now without table tennis. Table tennis, the community, people and everything else about it has played a massive role in shaping the person I am today and the decisions I have made along the way.

If I was to sum my love and experiences for table tennis, the people and the social aspects of the game, I would probably say when no one else understood or got me, and I most needed a place to belong, table tennis gave me one.

Currently, I think I am building my way to bettering myself and my knowledge as I am currently doing my Level 2 coaching badge, so I am able to pass the knowledge onto the juniors when I go back to coaching there and also I run bat and chat sessions and I would love to learn new ways to engage them and help them too.

In the future, I hope to pass my probationary period of my tournament referee, pass my level 2 and hopefully one day, I would absolutely love to help other people struggling with mental illness through table tennis. I know not everything works for everyone but that's why it is so important to have many options available. If I can give just one person the outlet, safe space and direction that Blackpool TTC gave me then I will have achieved more than I could have ever wanted.

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