

Inclusion Personified

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Anthony Close is not your “average” table tennis player. Anthony suffers from selective mutism, a complex childhood anxiety disorder that renders him unable to speak in certain social settings – typically where there is an expectation to speak. He is able to talk normally in settings where he feels comfortable and secure, and where there is no expectation for him to speak.

It’s difficult for a child with this (or a similar) condition to umpire a match or even to reply to an umpire asking “heads or tails?” or “it’s your choice...”. Imagine how you would feel if an opponent pressurised an umpire at a key point in a match and you were unable to respond. Anthony likes it best when he has a blue-jacketed umpire!

Tournament play is made even worse for Anthony as he also suffers from sensory modulation disorder which means that he over responds to sensory information. The crowded nature of tournaments and the general hubbub means he can go into “flight mode” and just wants to get away from it all

It’s likely that Anthony’s selective mutism and sensory processing disorder were caused by him being born with an overactive amygdala (i.e. the part of the brain that controls the volume of the sensory input and the fight or flight response) and possibly rough, or bumpy, connections between the senses and brain.

Anthony migrated from football to table tennis when he was about 8 years old. He found the almost constant shouting (terms like “Boot it!” and “Get in there!”) from the sidelines very un-nerving. The move has proved extremely successful and he finishes the 2010/11 table tennis season No. 2 on the English Table Tennis Association’s Boys Under 11 ranking list. He has consistently been in the top four in England for the past two seasons (including a spell at No.1).

In that time Anthony has defied his problems with a series of stunning performances around the country to win U11 Boys Singles events at several ETTA computer ranking tournaments: Blackpool 2*, Ernest Bevin 1*, Cirencester 1*, Northfield 2*, Yorkshire 1* and Westfield 1*. His most satisfying wins were against the England No.1, Alex Ramsden (Northamptonshire), in the final at the Westfield 1* last season and the England No. 2, James Smith (Kent), in the finals at the Blackpool 2* and Cirencester 1* tournaments this season. He also overcame a number of challenges to win at Ernest Bevin last season. There were numerous runners-up spots including the end of season Grantham 2*, the Cadet (U15) Boys Singles and the Junior (U18) doubles – with Jordan Ingles – in the Watford & District Table Tennis Championships. Anthony also finished third in the U11 Boys Singles at the Greater London Championships.

Team success came with Ellenborough TTC’s 2009/10 National Cadet League winning team (with Marios Leonidou, Vincent Stacey and Ryan Gaveglia) and Ellenborough TTC’s 2010/11 National Cadet League runners-up team (with Arif Ahmet, Ryan Williams and Ryan Gaveglia). Anthony also enjoyed representing Eastern Region in the National Regional Squad Championships and a recent Boys U12 friendly against Wales. England won 7-3.

There have been some disappointments for Anthony along the way – for example his loss in the quarter finals of the 2010/11 national championships to Joseph Clark (Cleveland) 18-16 in the fifth set. Anthony had a genuine chance of progressing but takes the positives from defeats. At the time, Anthony said: “Of course I was upset to lose, but that was an epic match with some fantastic rallies. There was a large crowd watching and I won the point at deuce or match point down 6 times! Colin Wilson told my Dad that it showed amazing resilience and performance under pressure ... and against someone who I’ve always struggled to beat. It’s important I continue enjoying my table tennis and practice hard – that’s a winning combination!” Just four weeks later, Anthony turned the tables by beating his nemesis in the semi-final of the Grantham2* (11-8 in the fifth) after being two sets to one down. They say you learn more in defeat!

As Anthony finishes his last full season at U11, he said “I’ve had a lot of fun competing in table tennis

tournaments around the country. I've enjoyed visiting places like Blackpool and Halifax where the people have been very friendly: speaking to Tony Taylor about football was a highlight! Sometimes I feel just as good when players come up and speak to me – maybe asking me for a knock – as winning matches. I find it very difficult to start conversations (and it's often the people I most want to talk to that I am unable to talk to) so it's great when boys like James Knudson, James Smith, Adam Wilson and Sam Wilson make the effort to speak to me."

"It's been fantastic to be accepted and compete with, really good players like Sam Wilson, Joseph Clark, James Smith, Ethan Walsh, Alex Ramsden, etc. – I've been proud to be part of this U11 age group. It's now time for the younger stars like Branislav Zikovic and TJ O'Sullivan. My next goals are to be invited to an ETTA summer camp and/or the England Youth Development Squad, and win the "Mizzy Trophy". You should Google the last one!"

Anthony would like to say a big thank you to Nick McCoy and Terry Wilson at Ellenborough TTC for welcoming him at the club one Sunday morning and providing him with "a sporting opportunity". He also wants to say "thank you" to the professional coaches at Ellenborough TTC, the regional coaches, Watford Jets (his local league club) and all the volunteers. Table tennis wouldn't happen without them. And a really BIG "thank you" must go to Keith Williams and Jimmy Walsh who have coached him at vital times in tournaments. If it hadn't been for them he wouldn't have got as far in the sport.

Regional Coach Stephen Gersten said "Given that Anthony's problems are exacerbated by pressure, his results in tournaments have confounded many observers. The truth is that he is a real fighter and has earned the respect of his East Region teammates. Juniors such as James Knudson and Evie Collier have always had a word of encouragement for Anthony (as have members of the current England Team!) which has helped him along the way". Stephen went on to say that "Some might say that exposing Anthony to the pressure of tournaments is wrong, but I know that he has gained confidence from his table tennis exploits which has spilled over into other areas of his life"..

The message that sport can be a huge contributor for helping with selective mutism is supported by Jessica Thorpe who wrote "Slipping in and out of my Two Worlds". Jessica said that "sport helped me beyond belief" and by coincidence lives close to Ellenborough TTC.

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