

Former World Champion Leach passes away

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Former World Champion Johnny Leach MBE

Johnny Leach, M.B.E. passed away on Thursday, 5th June age 91. His contribution to English table tennis is widely recognised as a World Champion and a top player. However, the beneficial impact that he had on the sport working within the English Table Tennis Association and from his commercial activities was arguably of even greater benefit and, with the possible exception of Ivor Montagu, his contribution to the sport in this country was probably greater than any other individual.

His impact as a player in winning the World Championship twice in 1949 and 1951 and the Swaythling Cup with the England team in 1953 are obvious. Johnny was the only the second English born player, after Fred Perry, who learned his table tennis in this country, to win the Men's Singles title at the World Championships.



Johnny Leach with his World

Championships trophy from 1951

As a coach, Johnny's contribution was also substantial, being the England Men's team captain for approximately eight successive seasons, from the 1964 European championships in Malmo, Sweden and Wembley 1966, through World Championships in Belgrade, Sweden and Munich to the European Championships in Rotterdam in 1972. At this time England were one of the top countries in Europe and the World with players like Denis Neale and Chester Barnes in the team. All of this was recognised by the UK Government when Johnny was awarded the M.B.E. in 1966.

Johnny had the love of the sport and the intellectual prowess to make an even bigger impact by using his fame to not just promoting his business but also the sport in England in a very beneficial manner. He was able to sell the idea of mass coaching for kids to Butlins holiday camps and to the News of the World and, as a result of this, introduced tens of thousands of young people to the sport, including myself, over more than a decade from around 1956. Johnny employed most of the best players in England from the start of the summer in May right through to the Boy and Girl of the Week competition at Bognor Regis in September. At all of the eight or nine Butlins Camps in England, Scotland and Wales, the coaching sessions took place every morning and every afternoon each week with 5 or 6 tables, with the boy and girl of the week invited back for another weeks' coaching with all the rest of the winners to Bognor Regis. In addition to most of the best junior players in Britain being heavily involved in this every year, the coaching team glittered, including players like Diane Rowe, Helen Elliot, Denis Neale, Brian Kennedy, etc. Many players who started to play at Butlins went on to play for their country, including Denis Neale, Chester Barnes, Lesley Bell, Jill Shirley, (Hammersley Parker), Stuart Gibbs, and Alan Hydes.

Johnny was also responsible for the high profile Eagle Girl Junior tournament that was sponsored by two of Britain's leading children's comics where competitions were held all over the country with the winners being invited to London for the Grand Finals which were televised nationwide.

Johnny also used his prowess as a journalist and commentator and worked for more than twenty years writing a weekly column in the News of the World, Britain's most widely read Sunday newspaper, on table tennis, and linked with ITV to commentate and manage many broadcasts including the English closed Championships on Saturday afternoons for many years, as well as other ITV sports programmes covering table tennis. He was also part of the BBC commentary team for the World Championships in Birmingham in 1977.

Johnny was also the Managing Director of one of Britain's leading table tennis companies,

S.W. Hancock, who were the British distributors for the then famous Halex brand which sold millions of table

tennis balls and bats carrying his endorsement. The company sponsored the ETTA as one of the leading equipment suppliers for more than two decades.

Johnny was also heavily involved in English table tennis and the ETTA on the international front, both in his role as President for more than twenty years and as an ambassador for the sport. He was the ETTA Delegate for the European Championships in Moscow in 1970 when the then ETTA Chairman, Conrad Jaschke, was unable to attend. He was also the ETTA Delegate at World and European Championships many times during his presidency and played a major role in the ETTA's bid to bring the European Championships to Birmingham in 1994, the World Championships to Manchester in 1997 and the World Veterans to Manchester in 1998.

Johnny Leach also played a major role in the Swaythling Club International (SCI), an organisation set up to help former international players from all countries, providing hospitality for them to attend World and European Championships as well as assisting with medical expenses for those who did not have personal funds to be able to meet the costs. The SCI is also the body which established and were responsible for allocating the host association and working with the organisers of the World Veterans Championships and this is still the case today, an event which attracts up to 3,000 participants every two years, the last one being held in New Zealand recently. Johnny was the SCI President from 1989 to 1991, and 1993 to 1995, SCI Honorary President in 1995, and Deputy President from 1997 until 2014.

More than this, Johnny was an excellent adviser to the ETTA officers since becoming President under the John Prean Chairmanship. He helped me considerably over my twelve years in the Chair and no doubt did the same for Alex Murdoch.

Much of Johnny's table tennis knowledge would have been learned from his time in the RAF when he was in the same squadron as the famous player and coach, Jack Carrington, who became the ETTA's Coaching Director for many years after the war and no doubt a lot of the credit for Johnny's success was due to the time that he spent with Jack in the forces.

There is no doubt that Johnny was not just a very effective player and coach, but also a promoter, development officer and ambassador for the sport, his impact was unparalleled. He was a person who was liked, admired and respected by all and his passing must not be allowed to go by without all of this being recognised.

Alan Ransome, O.B.E. (June 8th, 2014)

To see more details on Johnny Leach's career [click here](#)

If you'd like to leave your own personal tribute to Johnny Leach MBE please send an e-mail titled 'Johnny Leach Tribute' to russell.moore@tabletennisengland.co.uk

If you wish to read the report on his first World Championships success in 1949, you can do so in the [magazine archive here](#).

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