

It's official! Former ref Lester's loving his second career

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Posted On: March 17, 2015



Lester Smith at the recent Senior Nationals

Lester Smith has swapped the football pitch for the table tennis court as he embarks on a second career in sports officiating.

As a football referee, the 51-year-old from Scarborough advanced to Supply and Contributory League level, officiating as an assistant in the Conference North, the sixth tier of English football.

He also refereed matches in the early stages of the FA Cup, and was in charge of a game between Manchester United and Middlesbrough, an under-19 match which was shown on MUTV.

Now, having 'retrained' as a table tennis umpire since hanging up his whistle, he is targeting even loftier heights – he aims to become a blue badge umpire in due course, travelling the world to officiate at table tennis tournaments.

"I played table tennis as a teenager but then not for about 30 years because of football.

"When I couldn't play football any more, I thought I would take up table tennis again. And four or five years later when my refereeing career came to an end I wanted to keep on officiating – and thought why not in a sport I played?"

So Lester qualified as a County Umpire about two years ago having the written test and an assessment carried out, in his case, at a Halifax 3* tournament.

He officiated in the Under-21 Men's Singles final at the recent Senior Nationals and has now applied to be a National Umpire. And he is encouraging others to follow his lead and take their umpiring qualifications.

"I refereed in the FA Cup – even though it was the preliminary round, to say I refereed in the FA Cup is a nice thing to say I've done," he said.

"In table tennis, the opportunities for progression are there, and the progression is much faster than in football. I did 15 years and got to a semi-professional level, but still would have had nine or 10 steps to get to where Howard Webb (the 2010 World Cup final referee) was. In table tennis, you have as much chance as anybody to get to whatever level you want to.

"I'm 51, so I've probably got another 10 or 15 years, so in two or three years' time, I'll go for the Blue Badge. I'd like to do the Olympics and world championships and travel the world with table tennis."

Despite the obvious differences between the sports, Lester, who plays table tennis in the Scarborough TTL, sees similarities as well.

"You don't need the physical fitness that you need in football, but the concentration needs to be there," he said. "It's all about what is in front of you – unlike football, there's nothing going on behind you.

"And it's a bit warmer inside – I don't miss running around outside in the cold and the wet in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt!

"The man-management techniques I've learned are very useful. I've learned over 15 years how to deal with some angry people – and I understand why people can get irate, and I empathise with that.

"The instances in table tennis are a lot less. I could have 30 instances in a football match where I'd have to deal with something, but in table tennis it's more like once over the course of a weekend."

If you are interested in taking umpiring qualifications, [click here to find out more](#)

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