



How champion and refugee Mufid is inspiring young players

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Shot in the stomach and forced to flee the country he represented with pride on the international sporting stage, Mufid al Kurdi is rebuilding his life in England, with help from the table tennis family.

Mufid, a former Syrian junior national champion and coach, arrived in England in 2014, leaving his family and friends behind in the war-torn country. An educated man – a pharmacist and university teacher – he was granted refugee status here.

He was provided with accommodation in Plymouth and that was where a visit to the Ping Pong Parlour opened as part of the Ping! festival provided him with a means to get his life back on an upward track.

His details were passed on to Kevin Buddell, chairman of Joola Plymouth TTC, who got him involved in the local club.

And 54-year-old widower Mufid is now coaching, umpiring, sparring and doing anything else he can to help the club and its players, including working with up-and-coming youngsters at the Talent Development Centre.

“Table tennis is in my blood and Mr Kevin gave me a chance,” said Mufid. “I think some of the people between 10 and 15 years old prefer to play with me. They are very nice people and they are professional people, and I’m happy.”



One of Mufid's certificates detailing his table tennis successes in Syria

It is a far cry from the events leading to his departure from Syria, where he was national junior champion in 1979 and played for the national team from 1979–1983. He was also a teacher at Damascus University and managed a private pharmacy before his life was turned upside down in January 2013.

With the fight between Islamic State (formerly known as Isis) and government forces tearing his country apart, he was personally targeted, being shot in the stomach by an unknown assailant for the apparent 'crime' of being a Christian.

He was unconscious for four days and in hospital for 15 days, and his treatment lasted several more weeks. Soon afterwards, he applied for a visa at the American Embassy, but in the event chose instead to come to the UK rather than uproot many more thousands of miles away from his children.

"They shot me because I am a Christian," said Mufid. "Syria now is very crazy. Everybody kills everybody and no one knows why, it's a crazy war. Isis is very strong and very dangerous. There is no security, no stability, no safety.

"Syria was a very stable country but they are destroying it.

"I am a refugee and it's difficult for me because I miss my country and I miss my friends and my family," he said. "I have a daughter who has finished studying pharmacy and a son who is studying dentistry. They are still there. I was not allowed to bring them because they are over 18.

"But I'm happy here because at least I'm secure. I'm happy the government is helping me and I'm happy to be given a chance to play table tennis and also to coach some people."

As well as table tennis, Mufid helps at a food bank at a church in Plymouth and also works in a Red Cross shop in the city. He has received British pharmacy certification and hopes to work again in his chosen field.

In the meantime, he is immersing himself in table tennis – and is seeing a distant dream come true as a result.

He said: "I went to play table tennis in Bucharest nine times, and Bulgaria and Egypt, Libya, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco. In 1979, I am dreaming of playing with British players and now I am getting my dream!"

He is also a fan of the Ping! scheme, adding: "Tables in the street is very good, a nice idea because some people don't have any idea about table tennis and they think it is nothing. But it is a very nice sport. You need focus, ability to think and you can play it indoors or outdoors and if you are good or not so good."

Officials at Joola Plymouth say Mufid has been an inspirational presence at the club.



Mufid works with Emily Haskell at the Joola Plymouth club

Kev Buddell said: “We took him under our wing and supplied him with bats and shirts. He comes to every junior session and he’s helping out with sparring at the Talent Development Centre as well.

“He’s been a really big benefit to the club and it would never have happened if it hadn’t been for Ping!

“He came to the ping pong parlour and we were handing out the leaflets on play-on opportunities and he contacted me.”

Table Tennis England’s Talent Coach in Plymouth, Paul Whiting added: “We had a tournament recently and he was there all day coaching and umpiring, and at the end of the day he was one of the only ones there who was helping to put everything away.

“He’s a decent-level player. He’s got a different culture – he’s a bit more straightforward with the kids. They find it difficult to begin with, the way he puts information across is different, but every single one of them works hard when they are with him. He’s brought a different style to the club as well.

“The level of the adults has improved because of the work he has been doing with them, and their motivation to come to the sessions is higher.”

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