



Rob Sinclair to retire after 40 years with the Association

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Table Tennis England's General Secretary Rob Sinclair has announced that after working for the Association, man and boy, for 40 years, he will retire at Christmas.

Rob, 57, started at the then English Table Tennis Association in Hastings in November 1975 at the age of 17 and has been a constant, reassuring presence ever since.

Now after devoting his entire career to the sport, he plans to spend more time with his family at home in Winchelsea.

Rob made the announcement at this weekend's National Council meeting, where he was presented with a memento to mark his ruby anniversary.

And the man who has worked under four Chief Executives (Ted Walbuton, Elaine Shaw, Richard Yule and Sara Sutcliffe) and seven Chairmen (Charles Wyles OBE, Tom Blunn, John Prean, Alan Ransome, Alex Murdoch, Andy Seward and Sandra Deaton) has spoken warmly about his time in what he calls the "table tennis family".

That includes the early impressions of the sport after being taken on in the role of office junior.



"I left college on the Friday after re-sitting my O-Levels and I started on the Monday," he recalled. "My dad knew the chairman, Charles Wyles, and he said there was a job going.

"My first major experience was the English Open in January 1976 in Brighton, when there was snow everywhere.

"It was my first introduction to the sport and to see fantastic players such as Jacques Secretin and Dragutin Surbek, they were phenomenal. I watched them on the centre stage and it was a fantastic feeling. I wanted to play and to be the champion myself.

"I remember going with Albert Shipley, my predecessor, to buy electrical goods for the winners to go with their prize money, and doing all the duplicating of documents on the Friday night to give out to the press the next day.

"I was carrying all the trophies up to my hotel room in a cardboard box and was struggling with the lift, and a gentleman said 'let me help you'. I didn't know who he was and he didn't tell me but it turned out he was the chief of Norwich Union, the sponsor. It's a good job I was polite and said thank you!

"It was a phenomenal three days just two months into my career, to be introduced to the family of our sport. I was hooked ever since."



Rob Sinclair and Johnny Leach, MBE with Bill Vint's framed OBE and photos – which is now in the Table Tennis England Board Room

Rob graduated from office junior to the events department, where he was responsible for running the national cadet and junior events and working alongside Mike Watts, who was the national events manager. It meant most weekends during the season were spent on the road.

Then, in the 1989–90 season, Messrs Walbutton, Shipley and Watts all left the Association in quick succession. Rob became acting General Secretary in 1990 and was confirmed in the role the following year.

He has seen many changes since then.

“The biggest change is accountability – to the membership and to our funding partners in the last 15 to 20 years,” he said. “It’s important to provide value for money for our funding partners and tangible benefits to the membership – even though we’ve always known our sport has been too cheap compared with other sports.

“The other big change is we had five staff in the 1970s and money needed to be borrowed from the bank in the summer to pay for ongoing projects and staff salaries, because we had no income out of season.”



A more recent change, of course, was the move to Milton Keynes, and Brixton-born Rob admits it has been a wrench to leave his family behind to commute weekly – he and his wife Jenny look after two girls with learning difficulties and autism, Vanessa and Tracey.

It is one of the reasons he feels the time is right to retire.

“The move has been hard, leaving the family behind on a Sunday evening,” he said. “It’s hard on the family too. And it’s been tiring. I don’t want to be commuting on a weekly basis away from our ‘castle’. I’m looking forward to enjoying the property we live in – it’s an old builder’s yard and we had a hand in its refurbishment. Our quality of life is so enhanced by it.

“I think 40 years is the right time to go. It’s for family reasons primarily.”



Rob also plans to do a lot more fishing: "I adore it – I've got all the rods and reels. When I have a shave in the

morning I look down at Romney Marsh and the river Brede stares at me. But since we moved there in 1994, I've never been down there."

So how does he feel about his four decades at the forefront of the sport?

"It's gone far too quickly," he said. "But my life has been enriched by it – every event I've been to, my colleagues and all the volunteers who have embraced me. I shall never forget them. The sport still relies on volunteers – we need them and their expertise.

"The career was never planned that way but it gets in your blood and when you know you're part of the family of table tennis, it's a terrific thing."



1977, May World Championships, Birmingham. Ken and Mary Mitchell, Frank Clay, Pat Simpson, Rob Sinclair, Lil and Arthur Upton

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