Obituary: Neil Houghton, Derbyshire TTA

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Tributes have been paid to Derbyshire TTA stalwart, player and coach Neil Houghton, who died earlier this month.

Born in Cheshire in the late 1940s, Neil moved to Hathersage in Derbyshire when his father became a headmaster in the area. He became involved in table tennis when Colin Deaton did a coaching clinic at his father's school.

He taught biology at Eckington School and retired early around 2000 with ill health and then spent all his time on his greatest passion, table tennis. By this time he and his mother had moved to Newbold, Chesterfield, but he played in the Worksop League.

He coached many young players and his greatest success was supporting and helping Louise Durrant, from Worksop, to be the number 1 junior in England. He also helped Mr C Henry run the Derbyshire Schools table tennis for several years.

He joined the Derbyshire Table Tennis Association committee in 1993 and became the junior team coach, with his most successful season 2008/9 when Derbyshire juniors won the Junior Premier. He was also umpires' secretary.

He coached at Burton Uxbridge Club for several years and then moved to Wellow School in Nottinghamshire where he coached to the present day, and helped to run two junior 1* at Wellow as well as junior and senior county championships matches.

Derbyshire TTA Secretary Leslie Allwood said: "He has also been playing in the Chesterfield League this season with Pilsley and had played on the Friday before his death. Pilsley TT Club thank him for his support as he is a terrible loss and will be sorely missed."

Below, Alex James pays tribute:

“I first met Neil as a 14 year old while practising at the Sycamore table tennis club, which was then operating out of Holme Pierpoint.

“Although he would be the first to admit he wasn’t the greatest of players, he loved the sport and attended various coaching and training camps to work with, and shadow many leading coaches in England at the time, including Derrick Marples, Don Parker and Nicky Jarvis to name a few.

“He often attended England training camps in 80s and early 90s to watch the junior and senior internationals training, and I know that many of these former internationals will have a funny story to tell on Neil’s quirky sense of humour.

“One story I recall him telling me, was when he took some cold left over chips from the night before to a training camp. Matthew Syed decided to quickly grab a chip and eat it hastily to his disgust!

“Neil simply loved table tennis, and could talk for hours about the sport! The knowledge he gained from the shadowing of coaches and players such as Alan Cooke, with whom he analysed for his ETTA level 4, coupled with his scientific background, made him an extremely good coach in his own right.

“He was heavily involved in Derbyshire junior table tennis for pushing 40 years, running the Derbyshire junior county team for a number of these, working with the likes of Alan Cooke, Bradley Billington and Liam Pitchford and many more. He also coached locally at both Colin Deaton Table Tennis Club and Speedwell Table Tennis Club Staveley along with many school sessions dotted around the county.

“As a coach he had a large amount of individual success, with players he produced or helped develop over the years including former England junior internationals Debbie Petska and Louise Durrant.

“He also had a huge amount of involvement in Burton Uxbridge table tennis club and Wellow House table tennis club for a number of years and more recently working with Steve Walker and Howard Knott at Redlands table tennis club in Worksop.

“For me personally Neil had a massive impact on my table tennis development. He devoted a large amount of time taking me around the tournaments and to training all over the country and Europe including regular trips to the Isle of Wight to practise with Carl Prean and an extremely memorable visit to Borussia Dusseldorf.

“In our first season working together around the tournament circuit I won the Mike Watts Award for the most improved junior, going from 52 to No 12 in England. That season I also went on to play for England schools as well as representing England as a junior in Saudi Arabia. He always believed in his players and worked hard with them to achieve their goals.

“Despite scaling back my involvement in the sport over the last few years Neil and I remained close friends, he was always interested in how my family and I were, and I for one will miss the long conversations about table tennis!

“He will be heavily missed around the tournament circuit as a coach and umpire and the sport has truly lost one of its great characters.”

Neil Houghton died Tuesday April 5 and his funeral is on Monday April 25 at the Brimington Crematory, Chesterfield at 2.30pm.

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