



## Talented duo Amirul and Jasmin get funding boost

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Rising table tennis stars Amirul Hussain and Jasmin Wong are among the first group of athletes to receive a slice of £5.5 million of new National Lottery funding.

Amirul, 12, of Oldham and Jasmin, also 12, from Hull, have been given one of Sport England's new Backing The Best awards – bursaries of up to £5,000 per year to help cover expensive costs such as travel, accommodation, nutrition and medical bills.

SportsAid, the charity which helps the next generation of British sports stars by giving them financial support and recognition during the critical early stages of their careers, is delivering the scheme.

The athletes who have secured awards must have demonstrated outstanding ability to be eligible for the bursary. However, they must also show that, because of their family's financial situation, they might not get the opportunity to fulfil their potential without it.

The four-year scheme was launched after a new study, carried out by Leeds Beckett University, showed the rising cost of becoming a sports star has led to some of England's best up-and-coming talent dropping out.

Sport England director of sport, Phil Smith, said: "As well as encouraging more people to play sport and be active, Sport England's job is to help identify and develop talented athletes. But being talented can be expensive, as the cost of travelling to competitions and the essential coaching needed can mount up.

"Backing The Best has been designed to give a helping hand to those who need it – so that ability and attitude are the only criteria for success, and not money. Ultimately, we want our national teams to be truly representative of our country, rather than just those that can afford to reach the top.

"We are incredibly proud of our first group of athletes; they are an inspiring group of young people that deserve to be recognised for their talent and dedication."



Jasmin Wong

Tim Lawler, chief executive of SportsAid, said: “Backing The Best will provide the means to give certain talented young sports people the financial help they need to access the talent pathway and develop their sporting potential – not making the journey to success any easier for these athletes, but actually making it possible.

“Without support through Backing The Best, there is a chance some talented young athletes will be lost to their sport; with Backing The Best, they have a chance to reach their full potential.

“It’s going to be fascinating to see how the first cohort of athletes grow and develop over the next few years – we really think Backing The Best is going to be a game changer for sport in this country.”

Table Tennis England’s Head of Talent and Performance, Simon Mills, said: “We are delighted that Sport England and Sports Aid have awarded two of our up and coming players additional support through the Backing the Best campaign.

“This will enable them both to do things that previously would have been beyond their reach and we look forward to working with each athlete to use this support as effectively as possible.”

Also on the list of athletes are two para table tennis players – 17-year-old Billy Shilton, from Stonehouse, and Felicity Pickard, 21, from Burnley.

Born with cerebral palsy, Felicity started playing table tennis in 2010 when she wanted to find a sport she could play competitively. She made her international debut at the Czech Open in 2011 and represented GB at the European Championships in 2013.

In 2014, Felicity took a break from international competition to focus on her training and she returned in the Belgium Open in October 2015. She showed her improvement and belied her ranking in the round robin women’s class 6 singles event to take the gold medal.

Having been diagnosed at the age of five with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (CMT) Billy was also looking for a sport that he could play competitively and started playing table tennis at the age of 12 after watching his dad

Michael play in a local league tournament.

He was spotted by the GB squad at the UK School Games in 2012 and invited to attend a development camp from which he progressed to the Pathway Squad.

He made his international debut in Belgium in 2013 and was selected for his first major championship – the European Championships in Denmark – in 2015 where he exceeded all expectations in taking bronze in the men's class 7 singles and silver in the team event.

Following the European Championships the ITTF Para Table Tennis Committee made the decision to reclassify him as a class 8 player and he responded with a superb performance to win his first singles gold medal in Belgium and finished the 2015 season by taking team bronze in the China Open and singles bronze in Costa Rica.

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