



Chairman's message - May 2016

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During the past few weeks I have had the pleasure of seeing table tennis at either end of a multi-generational age range.

I spent a most enjoyable weekend in Huddersfield watching our top Cadets and Juniors, some not yet in their teens, competing with determination and skill for our National titles. They give us much hope for a bright future for the sport.

I also recently watched a BBC television documentary about the benefits of table tennis to an ageing population, and which featured some of our veteran World and European Champions aged in their 80s promoting their life-long enjoyment of the sport and their abilities on an international platform.

Interestingly, the programme also ran an experiment with first-time table tennis players and proved the remarkable benefits the sport can bring in terms of health and well-being to an ageing population.

A sport for all, for life

Three years ago, when we first began our journey with Table Tennis England, we set out to show that table tennis was 'a sport for all, for life'. That is clearly and demonstratively true – and now it could also have considerable additional benefits.

In this climate of economic austerity, no area which relies on Government funding can afford to be complacent. We must accept the reality that there will be no unconditional support for sport National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in any sports.

The days of the Government – or indeed many corporate organisations – writing cheques to finance sport for sport's sake have passed and are unlikely to return.

Table tennis is undoubtedly in a stronger funding position now than it was three years ago, when our very core financial support was at risk. However, we still have to live with the economic realities that everyone must face.

Going forward, I believe we will have to re-evaluate how we are funded. We will need to be creative and innovative. I am sure that there will be central funding in some form, but it won't just be sport for sport's sake. We will need to demonstrate the greater value and return that public investment in our sport can bring in terms of health, well-being, and social values and benefits.

Table tennis is well placed to do this. We can bring our sport into the clubs, homes, schools, work places and universities throughout the country.

We can show that our sport can bring health benefits across the age ranges; that it can introduce young people – both boys and girls – to a fun, competitive, healthy sporting environment. It can be played for a lifetime and even in older age, can be enjoyed by many and brings recognisable and measurable health advantages.

It is both a team and individual sport and can engender values and discipline in young people which can last a lifetime.

Future funding for sport will be about what can be given back to the community. Here, we are well placed through our accessibility, our appeal to all ages and levels, the social nature of our sport and the huge benefits we can offer.

However, we also need to take some responsibility for our own well-being as a sport and therefore our own funding. We can not rely on others to provide. We, as table tennis' governing body, need to guide the direction of our sport into a marketable product which will attract partners and sponsors who want to be associated with table tennis, because of the benefits it will bring to them.

And for this we need to create a positive environment where table tennis can be played by all ages, in all environments and at all levels.

Clubs

We recognise that our club players are the foundation of the sport and we need to work with them to capitalise on the opportunities we are creating for more people to participate in the sport. Our clubs and leagues are the bridge from social participation to competitive play; and from competitive play to elite, international performance.

We understand that every sport wants success – and we must support our champions of tomorrow as well as helping our elite athletes of today. As I write this, we are waiting to find out if our top international players will qualify for the Rio Olympics.

If they do, it will be a remarkable achievement. Not only because of their talent, dedication and commitment, but because we, as a sport, and they as individuals, will have achieved that without targeted funding. For table tennis, that ended in 2012 after the London Olympics when many sports, deemed to be without podium potential, lost their elite funding. In the interim, we have helped to support our athletes as much as we could within the resources available to us.

There is no one single solution. We need to position ourselves to take advantage of the climate we operate in – through our public sector partnerships, through new corporate sponsorships and deals and through innovative marketing of our sport and ourselves.

We need to grow the sport at a social level; we need to support and enhance the clubs and leagues structure to provide an environment for competitive play throughout the country; and we need to provide the right pathway for our international players – and the international athletes of the future – to reach their potential. And we have to achieve this within the realities of the current economic climate.

I truly believe that we can achieve this. That table tennis is well-placed to deliver a competitive and social sporting package for all ages and abilities; that we can offer wider benefits to the community; and that we can provide the right pathway for our talented young players to prepare to compete – again – with the best in the world.

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