

AN INTERVIEW WITH RON BOLTON MBE



Question: Ron, you have just stepped down from the Management Committee of N&DTTA after over 50 years of service is that a sad occasion for you?

Answer: No not really. I am now 89 years old and things have changed such a lot since I started playing. Whilst experience comes with age there is always a time to step aside for younger and more active people to play their part.

Question: So what was it like when you first picked up a bat?

Answer: It was at work actually, and I remember it well – 4th August 1939. I was 17 and just finishing my first day at work as a Civil Servant with the Ministry of Labour. The people in the office in Nottingham asked me if I was interested in a game of table tennis before going home. I just went along. There was not a lot else to do in those days because the War was on. We didn't have TV or computers or mobile phones – just the radio and newspapers.

Question: Did you come from a sporting family?

Answer: No. Not really. I was really keen on cricket. My Headmaster at West Bridgford Grammar School was against my joining the Civil Service so if I had followed his advice everything could have changed. Jean my wife played tennis and badminton and I have a grandson who represents England at under-15 fencing, but that obviously came later.

Question: What was it like playing in those days?

Answer: Well, we all had hard bats – sponge had not been invented. Nearly every works or office had players, there was the YMCA and Youth Clubs as well and an “Institutes League” based in places like Working Men’s Clubs where competitions ran alongside darts, snooker and billiards. The game was very popular and the Nottingham League became properly organised under Cliff Draper in about 1942 or 43. We also had a public table tennis hall in Nottingham which attracted a lot of players

Question: How good were you as a player?

Answer: I was not bad, but I was also very keen. I loved the game and the Civil Service was helpful with annual leave and time-off. I entered the English Open at Manchester in 1947 where the top players taking part were the great Viktor Barna (Hungary and England), Richard Bergmann (Austria and England), Vana, Sido from Hungary and the Frenchman Ammouretti. He was a great defender who beat me in the men’s singles in the early rounds that year but then he was knocked-out by Bergmann. My partner and I were also beaten by Bergmann and a Swedish International called Flisburg in the Men’s’ Doubles.

Question: I bet you can tell a few stories about some games you witnessed?

Answer: Although I have played against people from other parts of the Country most of my playing career has been centered on the Nottingham League. Nottingham has produced a number of very good players over the years and I could name at least 20 or 30 very good ones but three particularly stick in my memory. Alan Croome was the best attacker I ever met. He could consistently hit forehand drives – that with the constant threat of being under pressure was his strength. Alf Saunders was a great defender and Billy England takes my vote as the best all-rounder.

Question: Were there any “professional” players in the sport?

Answer: No, but players such as Barna and Bellak often appeared at theatres and music halls around the Country putting on stage exhibitions to make a few pounds.

Question: Was this a successful time at the tables for you?

Answer: Yes, it was a successful period. From 1948 – 1950 I worked in Lincoln, played for Ruston-Horsby in Lincoln Division 1 and represented that County. In 1950 and 1951 I had moved back to Nottingham and won the Men’s Singles Championship both years.

Question: About that time players were experimenting with the idea of sponge on bats, how did that effect things locally?

Answer: The English and Eastern Europeans from Hungary and Czechoslovakia were on top of the World. It was in the early 1950's that sponge bats first became available. The original bats were over 1 inch thick and often caused problems for hard-bat users. I remember that unorthodox players such as Ted Jefferson and Clem Roberts were very difficult to play against. The very thick sponge was eventually banned but thinner sponge rubber coverings became normal.

Question: Did you use a sponge bat?

Answer: No, not for some time. I was using a Barna bat with either 3 or 5 ply that cost about 3 shillings and 9 pence (less than 20p today). I eventually changed to Butterfly Tackiness D on the forehand and Tackiness C on the backhand - with very little sponge - because that best suited my defensive game.

Question: The latest League Handbook shows you represented Nottingham a total of 339 times. That means you must have been playing continuously for many years.

Answer: I was playing in Nottingham in the 50's and 60's. For 2 years in 1962 and 1963 I worked in Birmingham and played for the YMCA at Snowhill and continued my connection to the YMCA when I came back to Nottingham. In fact I was competing with a Nottingham YMCA team from 1963 for about 20 years when I transferred to Keyworth.



Question: Were you ever coached?

Answer: No, I learned by reading books and watching the greats. When I played in the Birmingham League I was 40+ and still playing or practicing 4 times per week.

Question: Did you ever play abroad?

Answer: I took part in the Veterans World Championships in Helsinki in 1984. That was the first time I travelled abroad and the first time I had flown in an airplane. I completed in the over-60's event and got a bronze medal, losing to Ron Etheridge from Kent in the semi-finals. I competed in the over-60's Championships in 1986 in Rimini, Italy where again I took a bronze, losing to a Swedish player in the semi's. In 1988 I reached the quarter-finals in the over-60's Men's Doubles, but I got my best result at Dublin in 1992 when I was then over-70. I reached the Final against Les D'Arcy and took the silver medal.

Question: When did you last pick up a bat in anger so to speak?

Answer: I played with Keyworth in various Nottingham divisions until 2007 when I was 82. My wife became ill so family matters had to take priority.

Question: Looking back, who is the table tennis player you admired most?

Answer: Definitely Viktor Barna. He was a perfect gentleman, courteous and kind. I played him in an exhibition match. He was a very good defender with great footwork and a backhand attacking flick that was exceptional.

Question: What is it that has given you most enjoyment over the years?

Answer: Becoming the Nottingham Men's Singles Champion twice, representing Nottingham and Nottinghamshire at senior and veterans' level over many years and, of course, the Veterans World Championships medals.

I also played a lot of cricket with my local club, Old West Bridgfordians, as well as being selected for the Notts. Cricket Association in representative matches and being a member of the Ministry of Labour National Team for a number of years. I can recall in my cricketing days twice taking 10 wickets in an innings and scoring several centuries.

Question: How would you describe your time with the Nottingham & District Table Tennis Association?

Answer: I was Chairman for many years, and then became General Secretary under Alan Jesson because no one else wanted the job, and until recently I was the nominated officer representing the Nottingham League with the ETTA Limited Company. I have enjoyed the experience on the whole. I was especially proud to be Chairman when the League celebrated its 50th Anniversary. A lot of people have put in a lot of work over the years, not only me. We must admire people who put more than their share of time and effort in and at the top of that list we must be grateful to Janice Moulds for all that she does.

Question: What do you think the future holds for table tennis in Nottingham?

Answer: The Association is still functioning. The fact that it has survived through difficult times says it is worth building on, but we do have to move with the times. I like the idea that we could have separate arrangements to introduce new players to match play before they compete in our formal ETTA Leagues. It could also be an attractive option to keep older players like me having fun in the sport.

Question: What will you do with your time now?

Answer: I have been a keen cyclist over the past 30 years and a member of the Ramblers Association as well so, fitness permitting; I will try to spend as much time as possible out of doors on foot or on my bike.

Nottingham & District Table Tennis Association is grateful to Ron Bolton for his contribution to table tennis, and his patience in sitting for this interview. It is perhaps a mark of this modest and unassuming man that he did not mention that in 1981 he was awarded an MBE for his services to Sport in the Queens New Year's Honours List.