

Tuesday 7th May 2024

Deaf Awareness Week: James' Story

James Townsend, 53, like many, would describe himself as a 'pickleball addict'. After first trying the sport at a taster day funded by Pickleball England* in 2023, James quickly found himself falling in love with the sport and one year on, is on a mission to encourage others to pick up a paddle and get involved.

There is just one difference with James which has spearheaded his passion to drive awareness of the sport to others in his community: he is Deaf.

Born with hearing but becoming Deaf when he was just 18 months old, James has always loved sport. Staying fit and healthy has always been a massive part of James' life - so much so, that during the Covid pandemic, James set up an online fitness group to help other deaf people stay active.

So what is it about Pickleball that has captured James in a way no other sport has?

'It's so inclusive', James says enthusiastically. 'Players are so welcoming to deaf people - I was really welcomed into the sport when I first tried it and I've been hooked ever since. I go 3 or 4 times a week at the moment!'

'Anyone can play with another person of any age and any ability and I've never really known a sport like that. You don't need to be a sporty person to get involved and it's an all-weather sport so you can play either indoors or outdoors, all year round'.

After playing recreationally at the Surrey/London Pickleball Club, James decided to take his love of the sport one step further, and after a couple of months, attended his first ever tournament, where he won the gold medal in the 3.0 level.

'I couldn't believe it' said James. 'I was there to meet new people and see what a tournament was like and I came away with the gold medal'.

'I started to notice players being more and more inclusive - they were even learning sign language to assist with scoring and I thought wow we could really do something here!'

With his interest in the sport growing further and inspired by the inclusive nature of the tournaments and clubs he'd travelled to, James, alongside his playing partner Bryan Whalley, worked with Pickleball England to set up a Deaf Pickleball Action Group**.

With a mission to advocate for and empower the Deaf community (including BSL users) through the promotion, development, and accessibility of pickleball across England and the UK, James hopes the creation of the group will help to increase awareness of Pickleball in the Deaf community.

‘The creation of the DPAG shows we are serious about putting pickleball on the map for Deaf people.’

‘We have already added three new members into the action group and after recently completing my Pickleball Leadership Certificate, I’ve hosted a number of Deaf Pickleball Introductory Sessions, which have all been well attended so far’.

So what are James’ hopes for the future?

‘We currently have both Deaf and Non-Deaf players competing together, but we’d also love to host separate tournaments for the Deaf community, where we’d use visual scoring with our hands.’

‘We’d also love to have a team competing in the Deaflympics one day. We essentially just want to have more matches and tournaments around the globe for the Deaf community to take part in’.

But for now?

‘I simply want to drive more awareness of pickleball as a sport for Deaf people to play’ says James. ‘I want to take the fear and anxiety away from Deaf people and encourage them to head to the Pickleball England website or to the Deaf Pickleball UK Facebook Group, where they can find out more about introductory courses we’re running or find their nearest place to play’.

Deaf Awareness Week takes place from 6th-12th May. For more information about pickleball, visit www.pickleballengland.org.

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***About Pickleball England:**

PickleballEngland is a not for profit organisation founded to support the growth of Pickleball in England. It was launched on 2nd January 2019 and already has over 8,000 registered members. PickleballEngland has met the criteria to be recognised by Sport England and has started the application process. In 2010, three Pickleball clubs were set up in the UK and were set up by people who had seen or experienced the game in the USA and wanted to introduce it to the UK. It is now estimated that there are over 25,000 players and over

540 venues in the UK. Head to www.pickleballengland.org and use the 'Club Locator' feature to find your nearest location and begin your journey.

****About the Deaf Pickleball Action Group:**

Mission

Our mission is to advocate for and empower the Deaf community, including British Sign Language users, through the promotion, development, and accessibility of pickleball across England / UK. We are committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment where individuals of all abilities can participate, thrive, and enjoy the benefits of pickleball, while championing the unique needs and perspectives of the Deaf community.

Vision

To ensure that individuals within the Deaf community, including British Sign Language (BSL) users of all ages and abilities, across every community throughout England / UK, have equal access to and participation in the sport of pickleball.

Who We Are

DPAG is a dedicated working group operating under Pickleball England, focused on enhancing accessibility and inclusivity within the sport. Our mission encompasses various initiatives, including introducing Deaf individuals to pickleball, supporting local clubs with Deaf awareness, providing advisory services to Pickleball England on matters related to the Deaf community and British Sign Language, and organising Deaf festivals and tournaments. Through our efforts, we strive to foster a welcoming and inclusive environment for Deaf individuals to engage and excel in pickleball across England and the UK.

The DPAG team consists of James Townsend, Bryan Whalley, Julie McCauley, Andrea Hardwick and Marcel Hirshman. Additionally, James Townsend will be fulfilling the role of Liaison Officer within the group.