

RAISING THE GAME



A DIFFERENT BALL GAME

Take the core bits of cricket, transport them to a table tennis table, invite a host of young people with a range of disabilities to play and you've got a recipe for sporting success, as **Steve Morgan** discovers at the Table Cricket Finals in London

You had to go back three years to find a Lord's final quite like it. And just like 2019, it went all the way – a gripping climax and a new name on the coveted trophy. You could be forgiven for thinking here of England's Men's World Cup success. But for players up and down the land, a return to HQ for the first Lord's Taverners National Table Cricket Finals since Covid-19 struck meant no less to those who've missed both the sport and the interaction it provides so keenly.

An initial field of 100 schools were whittled down to ten through county and regional competitions for the mid-June Lord's meet, with guests including England's Ben Foakes and Southern Vipers skipper Georgia Adams. The pair were co-commentators for the final, alongside finals day regular Marcus Buckland.

Table cricket is played on an adapted tennis table, with scoring zones, five fielders with sliding panels, a small bat and a choice of two balls for the bowler – one weighted for trickery. It takes all the aspects of mainstream cricket, providing a more inclusive and accessible form that allows young people with a wide range of disabilities to participate, meet new friends and have fun.

It was a remarkable victory for Beech Academy of Mansfield, who defeated reigning champions Ralph Thoresby School from Leeds in the final over of the final. Success was achieved with just two balls to spare in the tournament.

Victory was more noteworthy given that most of Beech's six-strong team, ranging from school years seven to 13 – captained by 18-year-old Louise Morley – were only introduced to the sport within the past month and a half. That, however, is the beauty of the game. The speed with which it can be picked up makes it an instant hit. Literally, in this

“Seeing young people be adventurous in a new situation was really positive”

**Richard Preskey,
Nottinghamshire disability
cricket officer**



Table toppers: Beech Academy's successful table cricket side enjoy their win at Lord's (above) as Louise Morley (left, watched by Ben Foakes and MC Marcus Buckland) and Jordan Cope (right) focus on the game in hand

case, as Richard Preskey, Nottinghamshire's disability cricket officer, explains. “I think only one or two of the team that went to London had competed before,” he says. “Having that enforced two-year break meant that some people had left the school.”

Victory in itself was something to savour. But for Preskey, who delivers table cricket across the county, its opportunities represent a bigger picture. “I've never worked with a school group that didn't enjoy it,” he says. “Seeing young people be adventurous in a new situation was really positive. There was one person in the group that had never been to London before. Just the excitement and the razzmatazz of the whole thing – it's a whole different environment.”

It's easy to assume that part of table cricket's appeal lies in mirroring something recognisable from the mainstream. Yet Preskey feels those who play it love the agency it gives them as much as anything else – it's their thing. “That's really important,” he says. “Some people get quite scared by what appears to be the rigidity of 'normal' cricket.

“Table cricket looks like something you can very easily engage with. It's a very simple game and people just get going immediately – the nuance comes later.”

By way of illustration, he mentions Jack Bird, a wheelchair user and former table cricketer himself, who is now part of Nottinghamshire's disability set-up. He travelled with the team, taking photos – including those used here.

“Jack is as intensely focused on table cricket as other people are around mainstream cricket,” says Preskey. “He ran

“Some people get quite scared by what appears to be the rigidity of 'normal' cricket. Table cricket is a simple game and people get going immediately”

Richard Preskey



the session at schools and explained what the event was going to be like. They all said that it made a lot of difference to them, because there was someone who'd actually done it before. I sat back and let him do the whole thing!”

The work paid off handsomely. As Beech Academy's victorious players headed back towards the M1 in the late afternoon traffic, school SEN coordinator and PE teacher, Georgia Baker, had expected a long, uncomfortable drive in 37-degree heat.

“We had ten minutes of party bus, cheering and celebrating, then they all fell asleep,” she says, laughing. “It was an exhausting day – our first pick-up was at 5.15am – but it was fantastic.” ●

The Lord's Taverners charity exists to positively impact the lives of young people facing the challenges of inequality. To find out more about table cricket visit lordstaverners.org or email liz.kuda@lordstaverners.org