

Weds July 18th 2018 - Event at Ipswich Borough Council

It all starts in May with an idea and some emails....

National Table Tennis Day has been a summer event for a few years now, under Table Tennis England's (TTE) initiative. Clubs are encouraged to organise some tables in a public space and get passers-by to pick up a bat and have a knock. For many people, of course, it is a game they've played before but experienced or not, it is fun and the day serves to remind people of what they might miss by not playing the game.

Britannia (BTTC) are a large club who play in the Ipswich and District league (IDTTL). Responding to the call from TTE to hold an event, in recent years we have held an Open Day, and participated in a neighbouring school's Summer Fair. This time we opted for a more ambitious plan in a joint BTTC and IDTTL venture, and invited ourselves to the Ipswich Borough Council (IBC) offices in the centre of town. IBC were quick to accept, so a plan was hatched:

- get hold of some portable tables
- borrow a suitable van
- whip up suitable volunteers to hump the tables and supervise the day

As it happened, TTE had some tables in storage in Ipswich from the Sailmakers shopping centre Ping Pong Parlour last year, and a few emails later, these were officially loaned for the day. After a visit to Sailmakers to check van access and table conditions, everything was good, tables ticked off the list.

For the van, one was volunteered by Sean, who with Martin would shift the tables. Days off work duly booked, provided the van was large enough this was also good to go.

For volunteers a general appeal was made within BTTC and IDTTL, which (as always) yielded excellent results. Geoff and Brian representing Veteran players, Lawrence and Thomas teenagers, Andrew, Sean, Clair, Martin and Nick covering everyone in between. As Nick and Sean are also qualified coaches, we should be covered. Note for TTE though, volunteers are more readily available at the weekend, rather than a school/work day.....

Other planning included requesting a goody jiffy bag of stickers, balloons and leaflets from TTE, getting leaflets about the club and the league printed and distributed, passing info to Andrew at IBC for the staff intranet, who also arranged that Table Tennis at Ipswich sports centres would be free of charge for the day, plus a quick survey of the IBC premises so there would be no surprises on the day.

On the actual day it was warm and sunny....

As the van would not accommodate 3 tables in one trip, a call ahead to IBC resulted in the loan of a bigger one, and the Table Crew successfully fetched and installed the tables at IBC in time for the 10:00 start. The volunteers turned up one by one, bless 'em all, balloons were blown up,

notices stuck in place and we waited for IBC staff to come and join us, pick up one of our bats and get busy on the table.

Overall during the day we had about 23 visitors, with some others poking their heads round the door to see what it was about. What was notable as about half the players were clearly not novices, a few being ex-league players and very much at home with a spinning ball, holding their own well. There was a slow pick up to the day, but in a working environment this was not such a surprise, with more players coming in during the lunch break and into the afternoon. Apart from providing sparring partners and welcoming chat, the volunteers armed themselves with various implements, such as a tiny bat, frying pan and even a balloon, keeping ourselves busy until people came in. The Keepy-Uppy challenge proved too easy for Thomas, who scored an impressive 274 in one minute, prompting everyone else not to bother, but the most fun was probably the games of Round The Table, one of which included the IBC Chief Executive, who demonstrated that away days and conferences are a good way of keeping your hand in with a bat after the work is done...

Come 16:00 everything was packed up, tables reloaded and returned, and by 18:00 the main protagonists of the day were either back with their families or in the pub. Happy days.

When the dust settled, how was it....

Overall, it was a successful day, in that it went off as planned, fun was had, no-one ended up in hospital and we are all still speaking to each other! Feedback from IBC was positive, it remains to be seen if anyone takes their interest in the game further, but the options are there. Otherwise, there are a number of points for debate and consideration:

- preparation was a bit rushed, starting with 10 weeks to go sounds like a lot of time, but getting hold of everyone in the right order to secure agreements, leaflets that don't design or print themselves and with many other commitments, one has to be patient, especially with volunteers.

- the TTE pack arrived with a week to go, after the site meetings and surveys, so was of limited use. The large selfie board didn't materialise at all.

- general logistics were sound, checking out the tables, access to the venue and arranging contingency proved very useful. The main advice for any day of this type is to get enough volunteers with a spread of interests and experience. Clair provided photos and kept them loaded on the IDTTL facebook page at regular intervals, and much else was picked up as a matter of course with the right people being involved

- as it turned out, the most interesting feedback came in the car park from someone who didn't take part but wanted to. IBC staff have to allocate their working time, and no provision was made for them to spend 15 minutes playing Table Tennis, which would surely have been a constructive compromise and made the day really buzz. Without taking liberties with IBC time, if we do the same again another year, we will suggest this and look to get clearance in advance to make it happen on behalf of our target audience. This will also spread out visitors through the day.

- a few people made the comment that they would be interested in playing the odd game with their workmates if there was a table available all the time. Going back 20-30 years, it seemed that every large workplace had a table of their own, so it was natural for social play to take place, some players getting that bit better and even entering workplace teams into the local leagues. Seems like this whole "Sports and Social" culture has died away.

- as a footnote, an IBC employee contacted Clair to ask for help setting up some kind of internal league, having enjoyed the knock he had with some colleagues. He was put in touch with Andrew at IBC to discuss provision of a table, and the idea occurred that it might be possible for BTTC / IDTTL to host an IBC (maybe jointly with SCC) championships event at the Dome on an annual basis. To be continued....

And lastly....

Thanks to everyone for participation during the day, but particularly to Clair of IDTTL, Sean of BTTC, Mike at Sailmakers and not least Andrew Wilesmith at IBC.