INTERVIEW WITH SIMON HEAPS
Bader Grant Recipient and Wheelchair Table Tennis Player

WM: An obvious first question: How did you hear about the DBF?
SH: Checked out charities that provided funding. Simon is self-funding in his quest to play Wheelchair Table Tennis for Team GB. Through personal fundraising ventures and a grant from DBF and another small charity, he now has enough funds to compete or he wouldn't have been able to do pursue his goal.

He was due to compete in the IWAS (International Wheelchair Amputee Sports) World Games in Thailand in February but this was postponed due to Covid. It's slightly different to the Para Events as you have to be in a wheelchair to play your sport and have to be an amputee. This will now go ahead in December but sadly IWAS have dropped Table Tennis as some of the bigger nations that would send a lot of players for the Table Tennis events have got Covid restrictions themselves. The next IWAS event with Table Tennis will be in 2022, which is also the Commonwealth year. Another 18 months to practice and improve. Although Simon will be be older he feels that he will still has a realistic chance of becoming champion if he plays well enough. The Commonwealth Games will be held in Birmingham in August, the IWAS venue will be announced following the event in Thailand the same way as Olympics venues are announced. With the likelihood that the Para Games will run alongside or closely after the Olympic Games, it is likely to fall a few days short of his 67th birthday. If he was to qualify, he thinks this would make him the oldest GB athlete in any of the current sports.
This would be great publicity and very helpful for fundraising. The young Welsh player at the last Commonwealth Games was the youngest competitor out of any sport in the Games and got substantial media coverage. Simon is sure that if he qualified he'd get a lot of media coverage before and during the tournament as England would be one of the strongest nations there anyway. Probably **the** strongest in Table Tennis.

"*Age is only something that's on your birth certificate*." (Simon Heaps)

Simon says he feels as young now as he did in his late teens when he was playing internationally before. He admits that he has possibly even more dedication now than he did then purely because he's got a second chance and age is no barrier.

WM: I think age also focuses you. As you get older you become more aware of what's important to you and what you want to focus on.

SH: Also because you can't say "*next year I'll give it my best*" because you have no idea what will happen. "*The clock is proverbially ticking*." Covid has been a problem as chances have been lost but I now have more practice time and there will be other opportunities to compete next year.

WM: Has age in any way impaired your performance? I'm amazed by how quick your reflexes are and your eyesight must be very good?

SH: Table Tennis is one of the quickest sports on the planet and actually, when you're in a wheelchair, it's even more so because the ball is coming at you a lot quicker; it's coming at you lower.

In able-bodied Table Tennis much of the game is spent with a player standing some distance from the table. In Wheelchair Table Tennis, both players are up close to the table. It's a very, very tactical game and you've got to be very quick with your peripheral vision and your reactions as well.

WM: Is there no talk of adapting the table for wheelchairs? To lower it or anything?
SH: Not that, but an adaptation is that the cross bar under the table is missing as playing in a wheelchair you can catch your shins on it, "*I've played in some places where that crossbar hasn't been removed and I've come home with blood pouring down my shin*."

WM: I know your amputation is quite recent so it probably wouldn't even be a possibility for you at the moment but why is it preferable to play from a chair than with a prosthetic?
SH: Not preferable but if you play using a prosthetic, you play in Standing Class, which involves a lot of running around and could risk damaging my other leg.. (As Simon is long-standing Type-1 diabetic, his doctors and surgeons have told him never to play standing or he could risk another amputation.)

When you join the ITTF (International Table Tennis Federation), you have to be classified and you can only play in the Olympics with classification. When he made his GB debut last December, Simon had to travel to Costa Rica at a cost of £2,500 and there was a distinct possibility that he wouldn't be allowed to play because before a tournament all new athletes have to be classified. This involves going in front of 2 people; one medical, one technical, taking your portfolio containing you medical and disability history where you're assessed, and they judge which class you're allowed to play in. Wheelchair Table Tennis is classed from 1 (most disabled) to 5 (least disabled); In Standing Class, it's 6 (most disabled) – 11 (least disabled). They do have amputees in those classes. Simon was classified as Wheelchair Class 5 for life because his disability won't get better but could get worse whereupon it's possible to get classified down giving him the scope to stay in the game. The Classification Committee agreed with the medical information that Simon should never play in Standing Class. Simon concurs believing that the implicit dangers to his health "*wouldn't be fair on my wife and my family*."

WM: Wondered how it is possible to play with one hand and manoeuvre the chair with the other? Playing is difficult enough itself but when you also have to take that into account it must take a long time to adapt to the change, especially having played to such a high standard before?
SH: Agrees. Also many of the people I've been playing against have been playing in wheelchairs for a long, long time. It's not just a case of controlling the chair to move backwards and forwards, you've also got to be able to move from side to side to a certain extent using the core of your body to help move you. "*It's a continual learning curve for me and that's why I practice so much*. *Trying to get better at wheelchair management. The playing itself isn't too bad, if you're in the right place! If you're in the wrong place it's virtually impossible*. "*For me it's as much learning about the wheelchair management and controlling the wheelchair as it is about playing.*"

When Simon first started to play from a wheelchair, he'd hit one shot and all of a sudden the chair would virtually swing round 90°. He has now learned not to do that and knows that as soon as you hit a shot, you've got to get yourself back into the right position again. "*These other guys are so good that they'll exploit any weakness that you've got. If they find you're facing in the wrong direction then that's where they're going to hit the ball*."

WM: You mentioned that somebody might be helping you with a chair. Does that mean that chairs can be specially designed to be more manoeuvrable?
SH: Specially designed, very much bespoke. Pretty much like a formula 1 Racing Car. Lewis Hamilton will have a car that's absolutely fitted for him so that he can get in the cockpit and reach everything. He's comfortable and safe.

Simon was lucky enough to get hold of a chair that was used in the 2016 Rio Games. This was designed for somebody else to fit the width of their hips etc. It fitted when Simon first got it but his body shape has now changed since he's been training and playing. He has also discovered that there are certain requirements that he needs for his chair that the previous owner didn't. The chair is now virtually worn out anyway because of the amount he's been using it. Now there are new requirements for better performance but, importantly, to be safer. The current chair wasn't built for him and Simon has now fallen out of it on many occasions although luckily hasn't hurt himself seriously so far. He desperately needs a chair built exactly to his specifications and size.

"*I'll only talk about Table Tennis but I know it'll apply to the other sports like basketball and tennis; it's totally impossible to play any of those sports in an NHS wheelchair. These chairs are built sport specific, the bespoke for the individual athlete so you fit in it like a glove*."

WM: What figure would you be looking at for a bespoke chair
SH: Quoted £3,200. For other sports the chairs can be far more expensive. Between £5-£7,000. He would have to go to Cheshire to be fitted out for it. They measure you and check your requirements. There's then a 6-8 week build time. A bespoke wheelchair is one aspect of the complete funding requirement pot. There are many other costs.
Simon wouldn't be able to carry on for the next 2 years, to incorporate the Olympics, in his current chair because it won't last and has also become dangerous and he has had a few falls recently. He had a potentially serious accident when practicing a few weeks ago. These particular courts had curtains between them to allow 4 players to each table during the Covid restrictions. Simon was leaving the courts and attempted to lean down to attach the curtain back onto its hook by the floor. As is customary, he had his left foot strapped above the footplate to stop it touching the ground, which is illegal and would instantly lose you the point. He overreached and, as he fell, his whole body tipped forwards with his foot still strapped in, pulling the chair over on top of him. He was unable to get out as his foot was still firmly attached to the chair. Luckily he wasn't on his own; 2 players saw what had happened and came to his aid but it could have been a very different story otherwise – on his own, under his chair unable to untie his foot, which of course was trapped even more tightly because of falling forwards.

WM: Presumably falling could also shake your confidence which isn't helpful when you're playing?
SH: You do a lot of stretching to reach the ball in Wheelchair Table Tennis and if your equilibrium starts to go past the tipping point, there's no going back. A new chair would need wheels set on more of a splay to brace the chair against falling sideways, much as on chairs used in Wheelchair Rugby, Basketball and Tennis.

WM: Imagine you were to win and achieve your goal, what then, Simon? I imagine you'd miss having a goal – is there an alternative you'd work towards?

SH: "*That would be a difficult achievement!"* He currently has 3 targets: get selected; try to win a medal (those 2 are achievable); the third would be to win a gold medal. "*This would be the hardest one as there is a guy, actually from England, who's very, very good. I've not played him yet; he's not unbeatable but he would be the No. 1 Commonwealth athlete in the world and the automatic favourite."*
Simon is confident that if he gets selected, with a lucky draw he will get a medal. He says,
"*If I was to go there and do well you're then only 2 years away from the next Olympic Games and I could be in Paris in 2024.*"

"*Everything's about taking little steps at a time. When I first lost my leg, my physios all said 'just take little steps. Don't try and run before you can walk and don't try and walk quickly because it's something completely new to you to walk on a prosthetic leg.'"*

At the moment, Simon's goal is to concentrate on the Commonwealth Games if he can get there, and then after that the next challenge would be the Paralympics 2 years later. Also, the World and European Para Games '*which will be part and parcel of it*' but Simon needs to get right to the top of the GB rankings to be selected for those.

WM: It can be sad when you have a goal and lose it sometimes; it can leave you feeling a bit flat. It's so important to have things to aspire to, especially as you get older.

"I think, certainly as a disabled athlete, having a goal has really given me a purpose of doing something. It'd be very easy to feel sorry for myself and not do anything, but I actually look forward to playing. I look forward to every single training session. It gives me a goal. It keeps me relatively fit. If that goal was taken away from me, being the sort of person I am, and I'm very positive, even if I couldn't do something for myself, I think I'd probably try and do something for somebody else."

Simon is a fully qualified coach and has spent a lot of time coaching. He relinquished his coaching qualification in July this year purely to give himself some 'me-time'. If his playing days do come to an end,, "*and I don't even want to think about that*", he would probably use his time to help youngsters but, as there aren't many disabled players in his area, he concedes that it would probably have to be able-bodied athletes. "*There will always be something else."*

WM: Mentions LimbPower and the Amputee Games needing athletes to encourage youngsters to participate in sport. She suggests that he might enjoy that sort of role.

SH: I've already offered my services to a new GB Para initiative called the '***Futures Programme***', designed to attract disabled athletes into Table Tennis. Simon is a member of 3 clubs and has committed to going to the club if anyone shows any interest at all in the sport and helping them to become involved in the game. Sadly, the GB programme is a bit different to other programmes around the world as it doesn't attract as many disabled athletes.

"*Dream it. Believe it. Achieve it*."
Simon created a motto about 9 months ago: "*Dream it. Believe it. Achieve it*." He expands: "*for the Commonwealth Games, yes, I've got a dream. Do I believe I can do it? Yes, I know it's achievable because I know what the qualification state is and what I need to do now is to achieve it, which will be done on the table and it'll be the wins and losses that decide that."*

Another example of Simon living by his own motto is that there are only 2 countries in Europe that have a Wheelchair Table Tennis league. One is in Austria, not a particularly high standard; one is the *Bundesliga* in Germany. They have various divisions and you get top players from all over the world, mostly European players, who play for these German clubs. "*Another dream is that if I need to improve I need to get better practice and match play*" As a result, Simon wrote to all German *Bundesliga* clubs a few months ago, introducing himself, saying that he's available and has a dream to play in a German *Bundesliga* Club, in the belief that someone would want him. He had a response a couple of months ago from a club called *Altersport Hamburg*, who want him to play for their team next year. They're a bit different to a lot of the other clubs which tend to be Table Tennis clubs with a disabled or wheelchair section. *Altersport Hamburg* is a purpose built sport centre purely for disabled sport with a swimming pool, basketball courts, indoor gym and other accessible facilities. To be a member of *Altersport Hamburg*, you **have** to be disabled. Simon has agreed to play for *Altersport Hamburg* in the German *Bundesliga* after Christmas.

"*Dream it. Believe it and, once I get out there, I'll have achieved it!"*

"*I believed that someone would want me, I really did, and also got some backing from the GB National Team Manager who put some feelers out.*" As a result, Simon will be going out to Hamburg 4 times next season.

Previously, Simon wouldn't have had the funds to pursue this but through personal fundraising, grants from DBF and another charity, not to mention sheer determination, he is now able to take advantage of the opportunity.

WM: Presumably to do all this you've also got a supportive family? It's a lot of travelling, commitment and time away from home.
SH. Agrees. He and his wife recently moved to Milford-on-Sea (where his wife comes from) as they needed somewhere disabled-friendly. Although Simon often uses his prosthetic leg, there are also times when he has to use his wheelchair so needs wheelchair-friendly doorways, disabled wet room etc. and the house fitted most of these needs without requiring too much work. He also considers that he is chasing this goal for his family as much as for himself: "*I know they're proud of me, I know they are even if they may not say it*", and doing it "*for the old 'uns as well!*".
WM: Agrees. Even if people who are considered too old to do something don't do it well, they're saying it for an awful lot of us that get written off, because it's amazing when you get to a certain age, you could almost be invisible a lot of the time.
SH: In sport unfortunately, that is pretty much the case. A lot of people participate in sport, particularly Table Tennis, at an older age but when you get to national selections, I would think that in the able-bodied England Team, the oldest person would probably be 28. Worldwide there is a guy in Germany who's exceptionally good, who's 38 and there are a couple at 40, but they are the absolute exceptions. (Simon is 25 years older than them!) You can do it but of course I couldn't have done it with 2 legs as you have to be physically fitter and stronger. In a wheelchair, all you've got to be able to do is to manoeuvre the wheelchair. "*Providing you've got a decent brain, which I think I've got; providing you've got a bit of technical ability in your wrist, I think I've still got that as well, the wheelchair slightly nullifies the fitness because you need to be fit but you don't need to be as physically fit, going to the gym, doing pressups, running... It actually brings you on a bit more of*

an even keel with the youngsters." When Simon went to Costa Rica for his debut, he was 40 years older than the next oldest person in the GB Team!

WM: We are actually younger now than we were at this age in the old days, if you see what I mean. When someone's out there proving that, it's so inspiring for other people just to say, you know, you're not finished. You're not just fit to hit retirement and wait to die. There's so much that you can still do.
SH: In the para set up there is no age grouping at all so all ages play together. Seniors could be playing with 18- and 20-year olds. In able-bodied Table Tennis, Simon is a member of a big association called 'The Vets'. You have to be over 40 to join so there are different age groupings; 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 and 90. Last October he wanted to go to the first Vets Tournament of the season as a spectator but was persuaded to play. Resistant at first, Simon decided that if he was travelling to Wolverhampton anyway, he may as well take his wheelchair and bat and, In his first group on the Saturday morning, he beat a guy who he last lost to playing with 2 legs a couple of years ago, just before losing his leg!

WM: I'm surprised at you saying earlier that the sport doesn't attract many young disabled players and wonder why that is. I would have thought it would be a really popular sport for them.
SH: It does attract them but not in big numbers. For instance, he plays in the GB Para Tournaments in this country: "*Some youngsters who compete are in their early teens but not many. In the able-bodied tournaments there will be hundreds of kids in the under 11, under 13 and under 15 class. In the para events there will be maybe 1 or 2.* "
WM: You'd think it'd be a really attractive sport for disabled youngsters because it puts you on quite a level playing field in a way. Both at either end of the table, at the same height, same distance from the table. You'd think there would be a lot of advantages.
SH: Has coached quite a few youngsters in his time up to a very good level to County and International standard. He would love to find a young lad or girl of 9, 10 or 11 in a wheelchair and coach them but there's nobody around. Most of the disabled youngsters are in the Standing rather than the Wheelchair Classes. He'd be delighted to see someone come through because although he's only been in a wheelchair for 18 months, he knows what's required and has the Table tennis technical ability that he can help them with as well. At the moment there's nobody in the country of that age who's playing in a wheelchair.

In August the GB Para *Futures Programme* attempted to attract all classes of disabled youngsters, anybody in the disabled community whether in Wheelchair or Standing Class advising them to go to their local club. The club will be able to get a certain amount of funding, and they will be integrated into the club and thence into the GB para set ups which exist around the country.

WM: What a shame that we don't have set ups here like those at *Altersport Hamburg* you mentioned where all sports are facilitated. It would be such an attraction.
SH: Will be interested to see it when he goes out to Germany next year. "*Everything is purpose built for disabled athletes*." Simon will be staying with the athletes in the same hotel and training with them in the Centre. People with all kinds of disabilities, in wheelchairs permanently or temporarily, will be there eating together, Simon may be there wearing his prosthetic leg but, when they are playing all will play from wheelchairs.

Without sufficient money, these doors would have been closed to Simon and he was keen to express his thanks to the DBF for the support he received last November when he was struggling to raise funds. "*Eternally grateful."* There have only been 2 charities that have assisted him, and it is only a small amount compared with what he has paid out to pursue his goal. Last year his costs probably amounted to over £10,000. This is true dedication to your sport, and we were proud to support such determination and commitment.

"*Self-funding is very expensive. One trip can cost £2,500 and a wheelchair around £3,200, Thailand would have been another £2,500, you can see where the money goes.*"

WM: The Bader Grant Scheme is very important to the DBF. We're always very happy when we can help someone to achieve their dream and love the diversity of those dreams. It's been a big part of the original thinking behind the inspirational nature we felt was important to the charity.

"*A disabled person who fights back is not disabled but inspired*" (Sir Douglas Bader)
SH: Had seen this quote by Douglas when he first came across the DBF: "*A disabled person who fights back is not disabled but inspired*", and thought, "*this is me*".
He had been mystified sometimes by people telling him he's an inspiration when he feels he's just doing what he has to do. He thinks it's the fact that he has thrown himself so fully into something: "*Well, I can't play standing up; I've got a bit of ability, I'm going to now try to do the best that I can from a wheelchair*." He has felt very humbled by it as he's never thought of himself as an inspirational person.
WM: Douglas never thought of himself as an inspiration either and yet, when he died, the family received literally sacks full of mail from people telling us that we couldn't let his inspiration die. It felt like a big responsibility to think of a way that we could honour that. We feel that the Bader Grant Scheme plays an important part.

WM: It seems that if you're faced with a personal tragedy or life-changing injury or operation and, I've so far been fortunate enough not to be in that situation, you can either give up and feel sorry for yourself or you can press on with life and I believe that **is** inspirational to other people. Mentions Alex Lewis who has been quoted as saying: *"If you said to me 'Alex, I can get your legs and arms back tomorrow – would you take them?', I'd say no.*" He says that donating his time to others was "*the most richly rewarding work I could ever do*". WM wonders if sometimes adversity can bring out a fighting spirit in people that they didn't know was there.

SH: Recommends a film that's just been released on Netflix called "*The Rising Phoenix*". He says that some athletes on there are truly inspirational including one Table Tennis player who has no arms and apparently holds his bat in his teeth and throws the ball up to serve with his toes. He will be competing at the next Olympics - that is what Simon calls inspirational!

Simon does have a wonderfully positive attitude to life and to having had his leg amputated; quite a shock for him as it turned out as he originally thought he was going to come out of the anaesthetic with an amputated toe!

Simon will be undertaking a 24-hour Table Tennis Marathon this weekend. It will run from 6.00pm on Saturday 24th October – 6.00pm on Sunday 25th October. He had hoped to complete this earlier in the year, but plans had to be postponed because of the Covid-19 lockdown.

Originally it was going to be a much larger gathering with people free to drop in to support and provide refreshments and encouragement but sadly, it has had to be considerably compacted to comply with current Covid restrictions. Whereas before there were going to be several young players who would all require sponsorship to play, as well as other friends and supporters, there will now be a team of 8, to include the amazing young Table Tennis player, who can be seen in video in Simon's post on the DBF website. All 8 have bravely agreed to play for the full 24 hours and will be adding any sponsorship they raise to Simon's funds. They will be rewarded by donations from a local Pizza Restaurant which will supply them with much needed fuel at 11.00pm on Saturday (may be wise not to play while eating that) and a supply of water to keep them all hydrated through their ordeal by another local company.

There are plans afoot to make this an enjoyable experience for all concerned and Simon has kindly agreed to do another interview following the event to share the experience. There's the promise of some hilarious moments and I think it will be well worth waiting for!

It was wonderful and very enlightening to talk to Simon. He is undoubtedly, despite his protests to the contrary, a truly inspiring man and he absolutely deserves to succeed. The DBF is extremely proud to have gone a small way to supporting him on his journey.

(Wendy McCleave – 29th September 2020)

If you'd like to support this gutsy and dedicated athlete, you can donate to his GoFundMe Page: https://www.gofundme.com/f/fund-the-simon-heaps-wheelchair-tt-dream