

Mike Brearley on table tennis on the Suburb

Suburb News has featured the Suburb Table Tennis Club, founded in 2015, which uses the Free Church Hall and runs sessions on Thursday evenings (www.suburbttc.com), several times (see SN124/129/135) and recently learnt of an article which appeared in the New Statesman based on the experience of the author, psychoanalyst, psychotherapist, journalist and retired cricketer, Mike Brearley. He writes about how his learning table tennis has informed his views on the process of learning, being human and psychoanalysis.



The New Statesman has very kindly given us permission to reprint the following excerpt from the article Mike Brearley wrote for the paper and which appeared on October 8 last year.

I'm giving a public lecture on September 8, on 'Freeing up thought in sport, psychoanalysis and everyday life' (which covers just about everything). And I've taken up table tennis. I discover there are links between the two.

I go once a week to a club in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where there are two wonderful teachers (Nico from Albania and Elinor from Moldova), and varying attendees from a mainly male group, many of us of a certain age. I never learned table tennis, never had a lesson, and only played when encountering a table by chance, for instance, at the house of psychoanalyst colleagues who had a table in their basement in Italy, or those rare cricket clubs (often I suspect bank grounds) where there would be snooker and/or table tennis

tables available to play on after the game ended. I would play with my father, who would let me get to 20-16 and then polish me off at 22-20. He was a Yorkshireman. As one spectator at Headingley once shouted, 'Don't think yourself so clever, Brearley, just because you wear socks.'

The learning process is so interesting, even at my age. Partly it's a matter of grooving. Play four back hands followed by one forehand. Play three forehands down the forehand side followed by a backhand. Use your forearm not your whole arm for back hands. Don't move so far with your whole body for a forehand. You have to be ready for the return, fractions of a second later. Spin and how to counter it. You have to think, but also let things happen. Moreover, you often play better not when you learn

a particular bit of technique, but when you 'become' the teacher, embodying Nico or Elinor in your strokes. And finally, in table tennis as with other difficult activities, things start to fall apart so easily, whether because of something unusual in your opponent, or because he is a bit sharper than you, or because you become complacent or over-anxious.

I came to it as a result of two stimuli: first from watching a TV programme in which a group of old people were divided into three: one section carried on without any extra activities, the second played table tennis three times a week and the third went for a 60 minute walk several times a week. At the end of the experiment, cognitive and other abilities were measured and compared with how they were at the start. What I recall is that both table tennis and walking improved people's reactions, cognition, memory and alertness, in slightly different ways that I can't remember. The second factor was meeting Matthew Syed when we were invited to perform together at the Cheltenham Literary Festival last year. Matthew was England's number-one player, and has written books (as well as in columns in *The Times*) on table tennis and on the psychology of sport. He put me in touch with Richard Grethe and the club.

I think learning table tennis is not unlike learning how to be more human through psychoanalysis. In the latter patients are asked to free associate, to say what comes into our minds; the analyst (among other things) notices moments of hesitation or obstruction to the free flow of thoughts, and invites the patient to notice them too. This sometimes leads to the interfering thought or feeling that blocked the flow, which patients sometimes come to recognise in statu nascendi, in the moment of its emerging. Thus we can come to feel, as they arise, thoughts that would otherwise never emerge, or never be taken seriously, but which are parts of the underlying assumptions that drive us and often restrict us. This is potentially freeing, and, as with small children moving from babbling into language, opens up new worlds and new forms of possible life. Suddenly, we can come to feel on the pulses what inhibits, and may be able to turn partial and vague ideas into more specific, more accurate and more articulate thoughts. As the American analyst Jonathan Lear says, we can "win wisdom from illness." Old automatic habits, compulsions, addictions, repetitions, may gradually become replaced by newer more inclusive capacities of awareness and in the end of new, firmer, stronger habits of mind, forms of life.

As in table tennis these forms become in-formed, ingrained in positive ways, but always with a degree of precariousness. In sport as in everyday life we are prone to fall back into old habits of mind and body, whether when tested too hard, or tired or pressured, or tempted once again by delusory seductions.

The article followed the publication of Mike Brearley, On Cricket, Little, Brown, published 4 October 2018 at £20.

If you'd told me 20 years ago that I would be attempting to break the world record for rowing the 2,400 miles from California to Hawaii, I'm not sure whether I would have laughed, cried, or just stared at you in bewilderment. You see, 20 years ago, I was very much a 'regular' pupil at Brookland Junior School. Sure, I relished our swimming lessons and was gravely disappointed when the netball teacher went on maternity leave, but I'm not sure anyone would have described me as particularly intrepid.

I went on to secondary school at South Hampstead where, if anything, my sporting activity dwindled (something far too common amongst teenage girls and something I'm now passionate about preventing). I did, however, participate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award and a World Challenge Expedition to Vietnam, which sparked my passion for travel and adventure.

This is all very well, but there's still no rowing in my life story. It wasn't until I went to university at Oxford that I discovered the sport, but I still wasn't committed. In my head, sport was generally just a bit of an inconvenience; the sweat, the uncomfortable bras, the fact that it didn't really fit in with nights out.

But then I fell ill; just before my 21st birthday - I spent the best part of a month in hospital fighting for my leg and life. I was in Oxford when I'd been bitten and became ill with necrotising fasciitis, a potentially fatal flesh-eating disease. There's nothing like facing your own mortality at the age of 20 to make you realise just how precious your body is!

As part of my recovery, exercise became a life-line, and I embraced training in a way I never had before. Rowing and exercise became a part of my life and followed me back to London, where I now work for an asset manager. It just so happens that this asset manager sponsors a number of rowing events and, through them, I have had the most incredible opportunities to race at international regattas, and also row across the Irish Sea. It was that Celtic row that proved to be a turning point. I met a girl, Anna, who, two and a half years later, would ask me if I'd join her and two others to form a four-woman crew to take on the Pacific.

In the interim, I had climbed a mountain in Nepal and completed an ultra-triathlon in Malawi so the ocean row seemed like a natural progression to my adventuring résumé. I said yes in a heartbeat; you can't deliberate about decisions like these or common sense will talk you out of it! Trust me when I say that there are many, many aspects of the row that would put most people off. The world record currently stands at 50 days. This means we will be living on



California to Hawaii - in a rowing boat?



PHOTOS: BEN RODFORD

a 29-foot boat for close to seven weeks, rowing two hours on, two hours off around the clock.

We will be battling sea-sickness and waves of up to 60 feet. When sea-sickness doesn't stop us eating, we will be trying to plough our way through the 4,000 calories of dehydrated food we'll need to fuel our efforts. We'll be using a public bucket instead of a loo. Showers will be makeshift at best. I won't go into detail on the sores we'll expect to develop. But it's too late to pull out now!

So why am I doing this? I obviously love challenging myself and I truly believe that we only grow as individuals when we force ourselves outside our comfort zones. Many people have recently remarked on my assumed fearlessness in the face of such an immense challenge but they couldn't be further from the truth; when I stop and think about what I'm taking on, I'm utterly terrified! But the reality is that you're highly unlikely to live a fulfilling life if

you actively avoid scary situations. Each time you take on a challenge, you build your resilience arsenal; the more you do things that scare you, the more you're able to do things that scare you.

To that end, our crew is called Girls Who Dare and our tagline is 'dream, dare, do'. We want our row to encourage people, but especially girls, to dream big, set goals, and have the courage to go out and pursue them. We are just four ordinary women, but we are setting out to do something extraordinary. Our wish is that we inspire you to do the same, whatever that might mean for you!

If you want to find out more about our crew and our row, please visit our website at www.dreamdaredo.org.uk or follow us on Instagram @GirlsWhoDare

JESSICA SHUMAN

The editor adds: Girls who Dare will be undertaking this challenging row in June next year. I hope Suburb News will be able to let residents know how it goes.



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