

Interview by Paul Stimpson (TTE) with Joanne Dinkhall (October 2015)

Surrey Table Tennis Association would like to wish you many congratulations on the birth of your baby boy. I believe you named your baby Douglas Paul Drinkhall? Some people are suggesting you named him after Desmond Douglas the ex-World No 7 and 11 times National Champion. Is this true?

As lovely as Des is – and he’s a legend – that’s not true. We didn’t name him after anyone. We didn’t know anyone called Dougie and thought it’s a nice name.

At what age did you take up Table Tennis?

When I was seven, there was a new after-school club at another school – an all boys’ school. A group of about 10 of us from my school went there but one by one everyone dropped out except me, so it was me and all the boys. I don’t like losing to men anyway and I was quite competitive and they didn’t like playing me because I always beat them!

How did your classmates take your dedication and subsequent success? ie Was it a hard time?

The rest of my schoolmates didn’t really think anything of it – it was just something I did. I left home when I was 12 because I lived in the Academy in Nottingham and all my friends were doing the same as me. It was hard to make proper friends outside of table tennis because you couldn’t hang about with them outside of school – we spent all our time outside school hours playing table tennis.

What was like training and going round the tournaments when your friends were going out enjoying themselves?

My childhood wasn’t your typical childhood at all as I did a lot of travelling and spent all my time outside of school playing or training for table tennis. Although this inevitably meant I didn’t see my family very much and missed a lot of social events, the things I have experienced being in competitions and part of a team have been amazing and I feel very lucky to have seen so much of the world at such a young age.

At what age do you think it good to take a child to their first table tennis club?

The sooner the better – you need to be young if you want to be professional or reach the top – but within reason. If you’ve got someone too young then they may not appreciate it and can get bored quickly. Seven or eight is a good age. If you ask a lot of the national team, they started at seven or eight, so there must be something about that. It’s that sort of age when you start to get competitive and can pick up disciplines.

Which Surrey Coach has had the biggest influence on your career?

Tony Pacitto, although he was based in Slough, so not in Surrey but not far away. He was very experienced in the women’s game and was particularly used to working with defenders.

He taught me all the shots – I was lucky to have him to start me off because without him I

probably wouldn't have been a defender. He didn't by any means make me a defender – he just used to show us every shot and let us choose. I had a natural ability to make backspin and preferred being away from the table, so that's how it happened. I think a lot of coaches now don't teach chop.

Would you like to see more women playing and coaching in clubs?

Definitely. I've already mentioned I was the only girl at that first after-school club. Then I played for Byfleet Juniors in the Byfleet League and I was the only girl as well – it would have been nice to have another female in the team.

One of the great things about table tennis is that men and women can compete up to a very high level on equal terms.

As well as that, it's fun, it keeps your brain active and keeps your body working. It's a fun way to exercise and you meet new people as well.

What was it like winning Gold at the Commonwealth Games in the Mixed Doubles with your husband Paul?

Winning Commonwealth Games gold and the Nationals, it was probably the best season I've had, aside from the Olympics. It's always been such a nice thing to have Paul in the sport with me. We've always loved having each other in the sport because it means we understand each other and have been able to travel together.

And now being a mum has it been hard to even think of training and playing again? especially when Paul has to be away so often . . .

Since having Dougie I've really quickly got back to my weight. Being in sport has helped me a lot to understand my body. When you're in high-level sport you're pushing it every single day. Knowing how to train and exercise properly really helped me. Mum and dad are brilliant, looking after him when I go training. Paul's away a lot and I'm lucky I've got a big family and my parents are both retired, it's a big help. I've been doing a few runs in the fresh air, and practising with Paul as well when he's home. The main thing for me is fitness. I'm 28 now and in sports terms I'm getting old and have had so many years of putting my body through the stress I've put it through. All the little niggles I've had, I'm feeling them now. You've got to listen to your body and if it's saying don't push me too hard. The last thing you want to do is get injured. The experiences I've had, I've been really lucky. I've been all around the world and seen some amazing things and I'm still only 28. I'm happy that I'm staying at home at the moment. If I wasn't to come back now, I've had some really good experiences. I'm waiting for that drive to come back. There's the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games coming up in 2018, but I'm not focusing on it at the moment.