

Joe – My life as a hearing impaired footballer

I have always loved watching and playing football. From an early age I would kick the ball about outside the house with my Dad, like most young kids do. My first experience of actually playing in a formal setting must have been when I was no more than five years old. I had only been fitted with a cochlear implant about two years before otherwise I would not have been able to hear properly and maybe never have been able to speak. My profound deafness was that bad. I remember myself and what seemed like about 40 children chasing after the ball on a local pitch. The ball proved very elusive and I don't suppose I touched the ball once but nevertheless I was hooked.

My first team I played for, when I was about 8 years old, were called Millhouses Juniors a local Sheffield team and after a trial, which I somehow passed, I made my debut at right back. Truth be told I wasn't very good, I think team mates and spectators used to wince whenever the ball came anywhere near me. That ball was still elusive, it somehow avoided all my attempts to control it. Don't know about playing right back, I think I should have been right back off the field out of harm's way.

My first experience of the impact of being hearing impaired came at this point. The manager, who stood on the touch line bellowing instructions to the team throughout the game, used to get my Dad to position himself on the touchline near to me to convey instructions from him and generally encourage me, as I would not have heard them otherwise. These instructions used to take the form of "kick it Joe: nothing subtle, and sometimes I managed to execute these instructions perfectly and even boot the ball in the right direction.

The serious point is that for hearing impaired players, communication is key, whatever form this might take, including signing. But even then, it was often difficult to hear properly, even with the implant, with all the background noise going on, from team mates, spectators quite apart from other day to day noises. The speed with which football is played even at the most junior level, does not allow you time to think. You need to use all the senses available to you to get by. But any additional difficulties because one is hearing impaired should not deter anybody from following their dreams and play football at any level.

The next issue I wanted to mention concerns the hearing device, the processor that I have to wear in order to hear. The replacement for the cochlear is implanted in the skull but without the processor, properly tuned in and switched on, I would live in a world of silence including on the football pitch. Of course you don't have to wear the processor but I have always chosen to except on one occasion when this decision was taken out of my hands but more on this later.

Wearing the device does present its own risks as football is very much a contact sport from the earliest age and there is a danger that the processor might get damaged terminally from the aforesaid contact with a big bruising centre forward. I have chosen to take this risk as the processor assists my heading even on a noisy football field and makes my communication easier which in turn has hopefully made me a better player. But even then the processor has to stay on! I've gone through some good old

fashioned wig tape over the years to secure the processor, whilst for a time I managed to achieve this through wearing head band. Nowadays I simply put it back over my ear if it comes off and just get on with it.

As I said football is a contact sport. This has never put me off playing at the highest level I could achieve and should not deter anybody from pursuing their dreams. Theoretically, the risk exists that a collision might damage the implant in the skull, which might result in another operation, but I must have been lucky so far but I can only remember one occasion when I had a serious collision with an opponent and a clash of heads. There are risks in crossing the road so I have not allowed the prospect of heavy physical contact stop me from getting stuck in and enjoy the physical and very necessary part of the modern game.

Referees have a difficult role to play. The best refs are those who go unnoticed, not those who seem to want to be the centre of attention, forever blowing the whistle, being overly fussy and not letting the game flow. I had one problem with a referee because of my deafness. Referees require players to remove items of jewellery such as rings and necklaces in case they inadvertently cause an injury to a fellow player. I understand this. On one occasion the referee applied this principle too far. He asked me to remove my processor as a potentially dangerous piece of jewellery. This was both ridiculous and discriminatory and thankfully has happened only once. My Dad did get sent to the stands for complaining too loudly. I shouldn't laugh!

Referees also need to apply common sense when officiating in matches involving hearing impaired players. I play for Doncaster Deaf team and have witnessed that some refs do not appreciate that some players cannot communicate verbally. I am lucky in this respect but some players can only communicate by what might be perceived as shouting loudly. Refs should not mistake this for an aggressive reaction but realise it is the only way some deaf players can voice their feelings.

So I have come a long way since that 5 year old. Through my love of the game, my determination to be the best I can, to push aside my disability and overcome any difficulties and discrimination, I have reached the position I now find myself in. Many people have helped me along the way and I have learnt something from all the managers I have played for and from the teams I have played with. I have kept going when times have been tough and when my team have been losing every week to show what can be achieved by a hearing impaired individual.

I have always given 100 per cent and never shirked a tackle nor a challenge. I have always done my best and that is all anyone can do, whether they have a disability or not. In fact I do not consider I have a disability, I just need a bit of help from my processor to hear pretty much like anyone else.

What are my ambitions - to carry on and be the best I can. I am young and fit and big and strong and am up for any challenge that the beautiful game of football throws my way. But we do need that little bit of help in life so I am hoping that my story and my ability to overcome my perceived disability will inspire others and encourage those who can identify with me and my story to help in any small way possible to fund my continuing journey now with the GB Deaf football team.

This is a national football team for deaf players. We are talking about football at the highest level for deaf footballers. Your funding will help not only a forthcoming trip to Poland to represent GB in what is like the equivalent of the World Cup, but also to hopefully raise the profile of football for the hearing impaired so that more players are encouraged to play and be successful so that deaf football is considered to be the norm rather than the exception.

As the dating goes please give generously and sponsor the GB deaf team to succeed in Poland in August. Look forward to hearing from you and indeed hearing you!