

B.L.T.C. Celebrates and Promotes Women in Sport

Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club prides itself on being a club for everyone. The club's family friendly and welcoming atmosphere have led to an influx of both junior and senior members over recent years. An area where the club has really excelled in, is the promotion and celebration of their female players, no matter their age or ability. Currently the club has a total of 62 female members, with that number continually growing.



This article will help to highlight why local girls and women should consider becoming members of one of Ulster's fastest growing tennis venues. It is hoped that the members testimonies will help to highlight why this club holds a special place in its players lives.



Firstly, the club is one of the few tennis venues in the province which has a female coach. Weronika Slawinska is a fantastic ambassador for women in sport and the opportunities tennis can offer young women in the local area. Young girls in the club can relate and look up to her, as she is a direct example of how tennis can positively influence their life. Weronika now lives in Belfast however she still travels weekly to coach the players, highlighting her dedication and love of the sport. She stated that,

"Joining Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club in late 2006 was absolutely the best thing that has ever happened to me. Over the many years it has been a place which has given me opportunities to be myself and to grow into roles of a player, captain, volunteer, coach, and a role model.

Although people come and go, it seems to me that the same faces always return to BLTC. They return to the family which we have created through dedication and devotion of all individuals involved.

Progressing through each of my roles become more apparent to me that not many clubs operate with an opportunity oriented policy. I would love to make it a reality for every club to encourage their members to take up committee roles, go to conferences, and play in ability appropriate leagues.

And although people repeatedly ask me why I won't join a tennis club closer to Belfast, I think I have given enough reasons from the bottom of my heart why I will travel the extra few miles. I can only thank everyone who has pushed me beyond my limits and showed me how much can be gained through getting involved."

As highlighted by Weronika, BLTC looks to provide its members with a variety of opportunities from a young age. The coaching team have created links with a variety of organisations including the Millennium Volunteering scheme, the Female Sports Forum, Women's Tennis Coaching Association and Tennis Ireland. This gives our female players the chance to develop not only their tennis but lifelong social and communication skills.

We currently have 6 female volunteers aged between 14-17 who assist the club with the coaching of our young players aged 5-11 every weekend. Two of these girls have already received their silver badges from Volunteer Now for recording 100 hours of volunteering, with the other volunteers remarkably close to achieving this.

Over the last two years, five of our female players have been selected by the Female Sports Forum to partake in "The Sports Leaders Level 2 Qualification". This gave the girls an understanding of how to promote female coaching and the keys to being a successful coach in a variety of sports. They gained knowledge and expertise which can be used both at BLTC and in later life. Two of these girls are now currently working through their Tennis Ireland Play and Stay Assistant Course as they wish to take their tennis coaching to the next level.

As mentioned in recent weeks BLTC now has a junior committee, consisting of 8 junior members aged between 14-18. This committee consists of 5 females, with Cara Pirie (aged 17) being the junior club chairwoman. Cara was selected as the Ulster representative for the recent Tennis Ireland "Young Women Leadership Programme". The young females worked on looking at goal setting, tips, lessons and inspiration from top female leaders from around the world.

Many of these young girls are social tennis players, they play the sport for fun, while participating in these exciting opportunities that the club and the sport of tennis offers them. Cara explained her reasoning for signing up for the Tennis Ireland course,

"I am passionate about the empowerment of girls in tennis. The course is a six week event on zoom and I have had a fantastic opportunity to meet with 29 girls representing various clubs across Ireland. I listened and learned from their experiences as well as some high profile guest speakers, such as former Irish number one tennis player James Cluskey. We looked closely at creating role models and tennis dropout, areas I am incredibly passionate about. This course allowed me to give the BLTC girls a voice and I will be equipped with the skills to make the club a welcoming environment for girls of all ages."

Two of the clubs senior committee members are both women and they have stated why the club has become such a massive part of their lives, and the lives of all its members. They wanted to share their thoughts about BLTC and the opportunities and memories it has provided them with over the years.

"My name is Mary Goodwin and I am currently Treasurer of Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club. I love, love, love tennis and am delighted to be part of BLTC where there are so many like-minded people. In particular, it has been great to see a return to tennis of many ladies, who, for various reasons, now have a bit more time to come out hit a ball, play matches, have a laugh, enjoy playing and reaping the benefits to our physical and mental well-being. Friendships have been made and BLTC helped a lot of us through lockdown, as we were fortunate enough to be one of the first sports to return to play. We try as best as possible to match up players of similar ability and hope to run another "Rusty Racquets" session over 6 weeks, whenever things start to settle down and we can return to play tennis.

BLTC's club secretary Karen Cherry stated,

"I have been a member of Ballymena Tennis Club for over twenty years. When I first joined, having not played tennis since school, my Donnay tennis racquet had not seen the light of day since circa 1995. I was warmly welcomed and never looked back.

I have seen the club improve and expand over the years and we now enjoy a fearsome reputation in the Belfast and District League. Our ladies team for example has won the Knock Out Intermediate Cup six times since 2010.

The tennis at BLTC is always competitive but always fun and I cannot recommend tennis highly enough for exercise, health and well being."

By reading the above it is clear to see that Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club is no ordinary sporting venue. It is a place for everyone, where you can come up for several hours a week and enjoy the company of like minded and friendly people. The club is here for the community, it is that simple, we are a community driven club who wants to help the local people reap the benefits of tennis like so many of our members have over the years.

Do you think that you wouldn't be good at tennis? You aren't fit enough? You would be holding people back? You don't want to make a fool of yourself?

Before thinking tennis may not be for you, please read these testimonies from two of our lady members about what Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club means to them.

"Unintentionally Ballymena Lawn Tennis Club is Ballymena's best kept secret. I am a tennis fanatic and having played social tennis with friends for many years, I was frustrated by my lack of improvement. I therefore joined BLTC hoping that membership would miraculously eradicate my double faults and the frustrating calls of "out". Immediately I was touched by the warm welcome, encouraged by the enthusiasm of the movers and shakers of the club and most importantly I felt included and appreciated, I was part of the BLTC family. I play social tennis which is fantastic. We play matches at club sessions and at our social events. We mix with young and not so young and older members as well as experienced and recent players, with Ballymena people and non-Ballymena people. A variety of languages is spoken on court; Romanian, Polish, Slovakian, Portuguese and from time to time an acceptable swear word in French. Tennis is a sport you can play at any age; it is good for the mind and the heart; just hitting the ball and making a winning shot gives you a wonderful feeling of achievement. What have I gained from being a "very" Senior Ladies member of BLTC? Super tennis, great fun and laughs and amazing friendship which I will never forget!

Thank you BLTC"

Finally BLTC is,

"A club where everyone is someone, a club where young and old, the talented player and the beginner are welcomed and equally valued...this is Ballymena Lawn Tennis Association.

When patience is shown and talent developed, when everyone is appreciated and encouraged to improve, this is the sign of a wonderful club. I speak as one of those beginners who has developed through the club, having experience of playing with those more talented than me, with those who advised me, encouraged me and often laughed alongside me.

There is a warmth in this club, a family atmosphere, where everyone comes together, irrespective of culture or background, to enjoy a game of tennis.

I never believed, on joining the club a few years ago, that I would be playing competitive tennis, and yet now, during lockdown, it has been the thing I have missed most. The opportunity to travel to other clubs, to meet other people, to enjoy a friendly cup of tea after a competitive match. The fun of club nights too..laughing so much on the courts, the friendly competition so welcome after a busy day.

I recommend tennis and in particular this club to anyone.

I used to drive past each evening and Saturday as I took my children to, and collected them from, hockey.

One day I made an enquiry and from that day, I stopped driving past and instead I joined in. What a worthwhile enquiry that was. This is my club."

So Ballymena, and the surrounding area, the question is, are you ready to call BLTC your club?

For more details about joining the club please contact BLTC Director of Coaching Barry Clarke - 07514280584

OR

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