



How newcomer Louise has fallen in love with bowls

Last month, England bowler **John Rednall** wrote about recruitment and integration. In this article, he traces the progress of a newcomer to bowls who has truly fallen in love with the sport

Above right: Louise was hooked on bowls immediately

When Bury St Edmunds resident, Louise Stecker ventured to the town's Risbygate Sports Club to play petanque one evening after a particularly busy day at work, she glanced at a nearby advert promoting free indoor bowls lessons. Her curiosity was raised and soon she was applying to club coach Mike Bowen to be accepted on his beginner sessions.

"The club coaches were very welcoming and professional," Louise recalls, "and they really explained all the basics clearly. They encouraged and praised me for my early progress, and I was hooked. Mike offered four free lessons and they were just great."

"She's very much a natural," added Mike. "Louise's delivery took very little teaching, and her love of the sport is infectious. You can tell she has played other sports as she has the co-ordination and timing."

It's true to say that this former athlete, an 800-metre specialist loves an active life.

"I do so much exercise – a class every day; step classes, pilates, yoga, health club sessions. I was an athlete years ago

and still just love sport and fitness. The petanque was a nice outdoor activity for warm summer evenings and I wasn't sure that I really had time to take up yet another pastime. However, I was tempted to give it a try and just love everything about the Risbygate Bowls Club and all of the opportunities it offers to its members.

"Risbygate makes bowls a way of life; everything you want it to be. It's a community in its own right, ideal for all ages. The social side is perfect for people who are lonely, couples who want to enjoy a sport together and groups of friends who gather to play friendlies or competitions. People make me feel very at home here. Sometimes,

"Risbygate makes bowls a way of life; everything you want it to be"

there's a void in one's life to fill and this club gives everyone something they didn't have before."

Like most potential newcomers to our sport, Louise didn't really know what to expect.

"I even thought bowls might be a bit sedate for me. Yet I watch the younger members, a nucleus of half a dozen or so 20-something-year-olds, and they are anything but sedate. I love watching them play their competitions. They roar about, celebrate as if they have taken a wicket, or scored a goal, and they are so engaged and hyped up."

Beaming somewhat mischievously, Louise recalls: "One of the lads bowled a great wood the other night and celebrated like a footballer by taking his shirt off!" (Note: This magazine article strives to promote enthusiasm but not through public undressing and in no part endorses this act of celebration, particularly in the Friday mixed league!)



THE START

Like many new beginners, Louise was not sure, initially how well she would take to the sport.

"I was useless at first, but it fascinated me. It irritated me that my bowls were going nowhere near the jack; it really bugged me.

"I'm very competitive with myself and I knew I had just had to do better. I knew I would have to push myself hard, to the limits. I'm such a perfectionist in everything I do. Most of the other sports I have played, particularly athletics, were built upon speed and muscle.

"Bowls is the first sport I have tried which revolves around aiming at a target. It's all about direction and force and playing to the jack, or a position, so in that respect. It is very different for me."

Six months after those initial lessons, Louise's evident enthusiasm for her new pastime is such that she plays in four different league teams and has just purchased her own brand-new set of bowls (her beloved Vectors), the newly designed club shirt, jacket and all the accessories.

Thrown in at the deep end as on just her second time on the green, she was invited to play in the best league team in the division.

Below: Louise's delivery took very little teaching



“There was a commotion in the corner and someone had not turned up to play, so I was called in as a convenient replacement at very short notice.

Luckily, my first bowl on the first end went right on the jack and I bowled surprisingly well. It did me good to play with and against experienced players.”

Further coaching from former EIBA national president, Bernie Millard, has given Louise more confidence and understanding of rules, roles and formats.

I was keen to watch and analyse Louise’s technique now that she is six months or so into her bowling career, and I have to say I was most impressed by her delivery which is stylish with great balance, poise and consistency of release. We went through a series of co-ordination exercises, drills to concentrate on accurate line and incremental changes of length.

My attentive pupil asked me to watch her backhand as this was her less confident side. After minor modifications to front foot positioning, the backhand was just as effective and well controlled as her forehand and she could see why from the recording.

We photographed and videoed her technique from different angles, and she was surprised, and delighted, with the smoothness of her release and follow through, never having seen her own delivery before. Nothing needs to change now; this delivery action will serve her well and the sky is the limit for her progress. She has massive potential and equal levels of concentration, desire to improve and willingness to work.

Paying tribute to all the members she has watched and learned from, Louise says: “Some of the bowlers in this club don’t know how talented they are. They play at such a good standard and are so good to watch and learn from.”

One such player is Walter McCann who comes to the club ‘almost every day of the year’ to practise for an hour or so, with deadly accuracy! Walter was in action and emphasised how crucial the facility is to its members in terms of friendship and inclusion.

“If you want a social roll up for company, you can do that by coming to the Friendship League, or if you’re more competitive there are loads of club, county and national competitions.”

While I was coaching Louise, Mike was working with Helen Coleman, another member who clearly loves everything about the club who told me: “Everyone here feels part of something special. Everyone has a say. It’s an easy way of mixing and socialising with others who share a common interest.” 

THE CLUB

When I visited the club to research this article and to coach Louise, I was made to feel extremely welcome, and this is true for all visitors. The four-rink green is one of the fastest running in the country and its walls adorn many photographs of county winners, international shirts, framed, and donated to the club and two attractive display boards featuring montages of the historical views of Bury St Edmunds, such as The Abbey Gardens and ruins and the beautiful St Edmundsbury Cathedral. A glass screen provides a viewing area from a comfortable lounge bar and ample seating at the rink ends for spectators.

There is also a well-maintained outdoor green; facilities of which to be proud.

Mike works tirelessly for the club which is built on firm foundations and very well organised. He has been indoor section secretary, executive committee and development committee member, assistant manager and coach with a vision for the long-term vitality of the club and its members.

“The club is in pretty good health right now. Post-Covid, we are almost up to the same membership numbers, thanks to our policy of recruitment, retention and integration. We are already planning ahead for the 2022-23 season. As soon as our new recruits have been through their initial coaching, we strive to get them playing in our Friendship League which focuses on social bowling, and into league teams for those who wish to play in competitions.”

A stalwart of the club who started playing as a teenager himself, Mike sees coaching as a science and he was obviously keen to watch some of the skills and drills I was teaching Louise. He is also keen to highlight coaching and opportunities for members on the club’s social media platforms. The club has installed screens advertising forthcoming events and has successfully sought sponsorship, some of which is used on the ‘Risbygate Masters’, an open singles invitation

event which attracts some of the biggest names in the country and is seen now as a prestigious addition to the calendar.

The Risbygate club realises the need to change for the better and to update. This season, the committee responded positively to the suggestion for ladies to play in some of the competitions that had previously been all-male.

Mike told me: “Some women were at work full-time during the day and therefore needed evening play, so we decided to apply a rule that every league team had to include at least one woman. It has been a great success. The men have been very positive and inclusive, and it has definitely given more opportunities to all members.”

From my experience, people who have played other sports and come into bowls later on are blessed with high levels of hand-eye co-ordination, commitment and a competitive instinct. I know several ex-professional footballers who have taken up bowls after their professional career, including former Ipswich Town footballers, Mick Lambert, Ian Collard and Allan Hunter.

Also, I have found racket sports players to become proficient bowlers which is useful as the Risbygate club also has tennis courts and squash facilities. It is indeed a multi-sports hub in a splendid location. Like most bowling venues, it has found cause to diversify and hires out its generously sized hall to various community groups, including two folk music clubs. Some bowlers were most surprised to see me playing the violin in a contemporary folk group, rather than arriving for a county competition!

At a time when recruitment, retention and integration are so important within our sport, it certainly seems that the Risbygate club in West Suffolk sets a fine example to all. Well done to its officers and members for providing such a wonderful facility for so many.



Risbygate’s well maintained outdoor green