

Bat-wielding youths serve up a sporting lesson

Ed Smith visits a project where table tennis is transforming young lives

If I said that I'd just been given a proper beating by a group of teenagers near the Hackney Road in East London, you might not be surprised. But it's not what you think. The beating was not administered with fists and boots. Instead, they were armed with nothing more than rubberised table tennis bats. And they beat me fair and square — with perfect manners and sportsmanship, not to mention some seriously whippy topspin winners — over a series of table tennis matches at their school in Bethnal Green. I was left licking my wounds, but the only real damage was to my sporting pride.

How did a bunch of teenagers in East London fall in love with table tennis? It is all the work of Greenhouse, one of the charities supported by this year's Times Christmas Appeal. Their mission is to use the power of sport to transform lives, and I pitched up in Bethnal Green to watch them in action.

The entrance to Raine's Foundation School — nestled in a downbeat corner of Newham and Tower Hamlets, one of London's poorest and most challenging boroughs — doesn't suggest a hotbed of sporting excellence, let alone table tennis. But I'm greeted by a surprise as

soon as I walk through the security gate. Two table tennis tables have been squeezed into the entrance hall, and eight students are playing doubles. By way of welcome, a forehand winner fizzles past my right ear. Hang on a minute, I think to myself: that wasn't a casual ping-pong knockabout, that was a serious bit of sport. First impressions tell you a lot about a school, and my first impression today is defined by busyness and urgent competitiveness.

It's now 3pm, and I'm taken into the assembly hall. Ancient gymnastics equipment — wooden scaffolds with ropes dangling downwards — clings to the walls. In fact, the atmosphere could easily feel forbiddingly Victorian if it weren't for the competitive energy that is emanating from the middle of the room. Around eight table tennis tables, 25 students — all wearing the same sports uniform — are playing a series of matches. There is no swearing and no arguing, just the unmistakable heat of competition.

Will Cooney, 26, coaches the kids 40 hours a week, 48 weeks a year, both holiday and term-time. Once a leading British junior, he is now part coach, part social worker. "This might be the only positive element of the kids' lives. At

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, RICHARD POHLE



first there is often some resistance to the idea of discipline. But I have clear rules. If they are rude or don't bring their kit, they don't get to play. I could lend them a bat, but they've got to learn discipline."

I'm in for more surprises. While I might think I'm interviewing the kids, they have other ideas. They want to show me how good they are at table tennis, and what better way than by trouncing me? It normally takes a lot of persuading to get me to try my hand at a new sport. But today — faced with the mixture of politeness and jaunty competitiveness of the Greenhouse kids — I just can't say no. Up go the sleeves, down goes the notebook: this is clearly going to be a table tennis tournament, not a series of sit-down interviews.

Dami, aged 12, is my first opponent. I offer little resistance, wiped off the table 11-7, 6-4. Worse, I'm even beaten at etiquette. When a lucky net cord produces one of my rare winners, I shout with delight. When Dami gets a similarly lucky break a few minutes later, he politely apologises for his unearned good fortune.

I must admit to feeling more hopeful about playing Charlotte, 13. But when she starts with a vicious forehand winner, I decide to try to distract her with questions about the scheme. "It makes me calmer," she says, whipping a cross-court back-hand winner past my flailing defence. "It's a mind game. You learn to trust yourself, you gain in confidence. You can't blame anyone

Clockwise from top: young table tennis players at Raine's Foundation School in Bethnal Green; Ed Smith is put through his paces; Coach Will Cooney helps Charlotte Devlin to improve her technique

“This might be the only positive element of the kids' lives

else. And I think I can be really good at it." Having been demolished 11-2, I definitely agree.

Charlotte is unusual in two ways. First, Greenhouse admits that it has struggled to attract as many girls as boys. Of the 25 kids in the room, only three are girls. In response, it has set up girls-only classes — they've found that more girls turn up when there's no risk of being edged out by the boys. Charlotte is also unusual because she is clearly highly motivated about her whole school career. I expect she is someone who always drags up the level of discipline and attentiveness, whatever she is doing.

Kayleigh, 12, faces a more challenging situation. She spends much of her time away from school helping to look after her one-year-old brother. This is her release. "Playing table tennis makes me happier because I've got something to do. At home, I'd be sitting indoors, unhappy, arguing with my mum. But with table tennis, I can look forward to beating my friends at other schools." At the mention of victory, Kayleigh's face lights up with a smile for

the first time in our conversation.

My next opponent, Ed, aged 13, is bright-eyed and slightly mischievous. "I like to joke around," he says, introducing himself. I expect it is an understatement. If I was his teacher, I'd pay special attention to what he was up to. Ed talks about Will as a mentor rather than just a sports coach. "Will used to get into trouble when he was young. He understands. He's an inspiration to me. If I wasn't playing table tennis, I'd be in trouble."

Will actively recruits the needier students from the Learning and Support Unit, the separate classroom for kids who are struggling with conventional lessons. Table tennis acts as a bridge, helping them back into the mainstream. Greenhouse recruits inspirational coaches, many of whom have represented their country. They mentor 8 to 18-year-olds in 45 programmes across London. Table tennis is just one of the eight disciplines they offer — the others range from judo to drama, and from swimming to dance.

But serious questions remain about schemes such as Greenhouse. First, it needs to learn to appeal to girls as well as boys. The girls-only classes have made progress but there is clearly more work to be done.

Second, what about the students who aren't suited to playing competitive sport? Michael de Giorgio, the former financier who founded Greenhouse, believes we should reassess the way we think about sport in education. "There is too much stress on counting heads and not enough emphasis on changing lives," he argues.

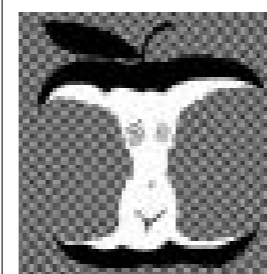
There is a serious difference, de Giorgio believes, between one hour of unfocused physical activity once a week and the serious development and inter-school competition that Greenhouse provides. "The first challenge is getting them to attend; the next is encouraging them to compete not just against each other, but also against other schools. That's a vital tool for breaking down the inward-looking reluctance to leave their own patch, their own postcode."

Revealingly, de Giorgio does not believe that sport per se is inevitably a force for good. "Just getting youngsters to play sport is not the point. You will get results [in social/educational terms] only if you have inspirational coaches who use the sporting environment to teach lessons that have an impact beyond sport." He is not part of the sports lobby. He is an educator who uses sport as one of his tools.

Perhaps that is a false dichotomy. Looking back on my own professional cricketing career, I can now see that my best sports coaches were, by nature and inclination, really teachers. They may have encouraged me to compete fiercely. But that was always part of a broader canvas. If I'd played cricket well and hated the rest of my life, they would have felt they had failed me as teachers.

That spirit, I suspect, underpins the success of Greenhouse. Its focus on competition may not suit everyone. But it is providing serious ladders of opportunity where they are needed most. I have another chat with Ed — the lively, difficult one — as I'm leaving Raine's. "I know a lot of people in very different circles to this. Now I try not to get involved with them. Instead, I am going to win championships and travel the world."

A group of sponsors led by the Alan Cristea Gallery in London will match donations made to Greenhouse through The Times Appeal.



An Apple a day
Emma Woolf

Now I remember why I don't usually bother with a Christmas tree. I risked life and limb getting it back from the market, precariously balanced across my bicycle, and now the damn thing won't stay upright. Plus it's shedding pine needles all over the place; my flat is crunchy underfoot.

By the time the doorbell goes I've wedged it into a large tub. My friends, like the three wise men, arrive bearing gifts: two bottles of wine, a load of tinsel and baubles and a box of mince pies (I am not famed for my catering skills). We pour wine and set about devising a colour scheme for the tree. "If this thing is going to stand in my living room for the next few weeks, I can't be doing with the shiny red stuff," I say. "I think silver and white only. And no chocolate Santas."

Someone puts on my Bon Iver album (the heartbreaking one) and we begin to deck the boughs, comparing artistic skills and chatting about our holiday plans. It's festive, this chaos all around me. I don't even mind about the pine needles.

As we sort the silver baubles from the green and gold, my mind drifts back to another December, two years ago in Cape Town, just me and T in a beautiful old hotel on the waterfront. It was strange to be 2,000 miles from home at Christmas, so we decided to make our own celebration.

We borrowed a stuffed reindeer from the hotel lobby and strung tinsel around a large fig tree in the corner of our room. On Christmas morning we drew the curtains to blazing sunshine over Table Mountain and a deep blue sky. T brought me breakfast in bed and we sat beneath the fig tree unwrapping each other's presents.

Later, we drove to Cape Point and climbed up to the lighthouse, looking out over the waves where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet. Instead of roast dinner and the Queen's speech, we had a picnic on the beach and swam in the sea. That evening we lit candles and opened a bottle of champagne to mark our first Christmas together.

Back in North London we've nearly finished our yuletide decorations. The tree won't win prizes for style, but it has a lopsided charm. We recharge our wine glasses and prepare to switch on the fairy lights. Lo and behold, the tree springs to life, magical. So, there goes 2011; see you in the new year.



To follow Emma Woolf's diary online, go to thetimes.co.uk/appleaday

Foods that combat wrinkles

Amanda Ursell



What I really, really want for Christmas is an anti-wrinkle plan for 2012. Please don't just tell me to stay out of the sun. I want to know if there is anything I can eat or take that will make a difference?

There is not a great deal of scientific evidence in this area, but smaller studies are beginning to shed light on foods and supplements that may help to combat wrinkles.

Pierfrancesco Morganti, Professor of Applied Cosmetic Dermatology at Naples University, has discovered a link between consumption of the yellow antioxidant pigment lutein, found in vegetables and fruits, and levels of hydration in the skin. He studied 120 women, aged 25 to 50. Some took 10mg supplements of lutein, some took supplements and also applied lutein topically in a cream, and others had placebos of both the supplements and cream. The lutein-consuming groups showed significant improvements in skin hydration, which in practice helps to reduce the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles.

The good news is that you can get 10mg of lutein through food. Just 50g of kale provides this amount, as will 100g servings of spinach and watercress, or a large red pepper or 200g of romaine lettuce.

Fruit and vegetables also increase our intake of antioxidant vitamins, minerals and other super nutrients. For example, antioxidants such as vitamin C help to zap free radicals before they are able to damage proteins and fats in the skin, a process that can lead to skin-thickening and the formation of lines.

Taking the antioxidant theme one step further, you may want to add AmeriSciences ASI0 liquid formula to your Christmas gift list.

It contains ingredients such as acai, cupuacu and acerola berries, and was developed by Nasa and the Johnson Space Centre in Houston to help protect astronauts from low-level radiation. However, a small, as yet unpublished, study on 180 women by the cosmetic dermatologist Dr Aaron

Pecking order

Christmas chocolates

If you love chocolates but are keeping an eye on calories and fat, check out the options below — and remember, moderation is key



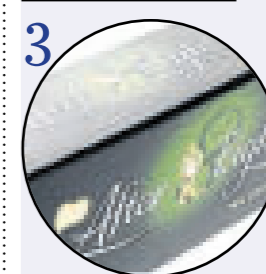
1 Matchsticks

20 calories, 0.9g sugar per matchstick
These are slim sticks of mint-flavoured chocolate with tiny pieces of boiled sweets for added crunch. They are one of the lowest-calorie chocolates and are free from artificial colours and flavours. Each stick contains 0.9g of fat.



2 Terry's Chocolate Orange

31 calories, 3g sugar per segment
These contain 2g of fat per slice and are made with milk chocolate and essence of real oranges, something that makes them especially tasty and especially hard to limit to just one piece, so be careful.



3 After Eights

35 calories, 6g sugar per piece
I'm always surprised that you get away with only 35 calories per After Eight, because their peppermint fondant makes them feel more naughty. It is the fondant that makes them higher in sugar than other choices, but lower in fat with only 1g per serving.



4 Quality Street

44 calories, 5g sugar per sweet
This calorie-count is the average for three sweets, although some toffees will be slightly lower and some of the filled chocolates slightly higher. The manufacturer says that the tin can be recycled, but that doesn't excuse eating its contents in one go to look green.



5 Dark chocolate cherry liqueurs

55 calories, 6g sugar
I am assured that you would have to eat several boxes of liqueur chocolates to get one unit of alcohol inside your system. That's just as well, considering each chocolate provides 2.5g of fat.



Read all Amanda's past columns on thetimes.co.uk/amandaursell

Barson, of the Surface Medical Spa in Utah, found that it reduced wrinkles by 17 per cent in trial participants who took it twice daily. Obviously this work needs to be repeated with larger numbers of women, but it is interesting nonetheless.

Last, I think it is important to cut right down on sugary treats. Research has shown that high blood sugar levels in people with diabetes trigger increases in the skin of substances known as "advanced glycation end products" (AGEs), which are thought to damage the skin's bounce and elasticity. If you have a nutrition question, e-mail amanda.ursell@thetimes.co.uk

To donate to The Times Christmas Appeal

Visit thetimes.co.uk/timesappeal
Call 0870 043 3764

Or complete the form below

Please send to **The Times Christmas Charity Appeal**, Charities Trust, Suite 20-22, Century Building, Tower Street, Liverpool L3 4BJ

I wish to donate £ _____ to the Christmas Charity Appeal. The money raised by the Times Christmas Charity Appeal will be used by the charities for their general charitable purposes. All donations will be split equally between the appeal's three causes unless specified in the circle(s) below

Alzheimer's Society Greenhouse War Child

Please include a cheque or postal order made payable to: The Times Christmas Charity Appeal or complete the Mastercard/Visa/Amex details

Gift Aid Declaration

I would like the Charities Trust to reclaim tax on this and any future donations and to pass it on to the charity/charities specified. I confirm that I pay UK income tax at least equal to the amount which the charity may reclaim. Please ensure you provide us with your full address

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Other _____

Forename _____ Surname _____

Address _____

Postcode _____ Date _____

Credit card details

□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□

Valid from □□/□□ Expiry date □□/□□ Issue no □□□□ If applicable Debit card only

Telephone number for confirmation purposes □□□□□□□□□□

Please note Charities Trust will appear on your bank/credit card statement

Calls to The Times donation line are charged at the national rate of no more than 8p per minute from a BT landline. Charges from other networks will vary. Donations will be administered by Charities Trust (no 327489) on behalf of Alzheimer's Society (no 296645) Greenhouse (no 1098744) and War Child (no 1071659). Charities Trust will use your information for claiming Gift Aid. We will not send your details to third parties, other than your nominated charity/ies. If you do not want your details shared with your nominated charity/ies, tick here