

# Charity's sport training helps children to reach for the stars



Ben Hoyle Arts Correspondent

Michael Craig-Martin was a mentor to the Damien Hirst generation of Young British Artists. Like many artists, Craig-Martin rather likes table-tennis, although he calls it ping-pong. His postage stamp for the 2012 Paralympic Games depicts a bat and ball.

He fell silent and stared when Ashley Facey-Thompson and his coach Grant Solder started playing each other, fizzing the ball hard and low over the net from their opposite corners with vicious precision in the new table tennis room in a school in one of Britain's most deprived areas.

Craig-Martin, 70, is thinking about what he recognises in Facey-Thompson, 16, a prodigy at a Morpeth School, a comprehensive in Bethnal Green, East London, who moves with the languid grace of a serious athlete and seems supremely unbothered by having only one working arm because of a condition called Erbs palsy.

Greenhouse, one of the *Times* Christmas charities, introduced Facey-Thompson to Solder six years ago. The charity runs sports training in schools around London that turn disadvantaged children into enthusiasts and even international players.

It is an approach that makes the pupils better, more confident, more motivated people. It transformed Facey-Thompson. Three years ago he was drifting, Solder said.

"He was challenging, he would do some daft things. I gave him a few bollockings and had to get his mum involved. Now he's doing so well as a person."

Facey-Thompson qualifies for the

Paralympics, but Solder thinks that with enough effort, he could become the first Paralympic table-tennis player to compete in the full Olympics. Solder should know: he used to be the England Juniors coach.

When Craig-Martin took on Facey-Thompson at the table, they were an odd couple. But when they talked, the common ground was obvious.

Facey-Thompson said that he was always sporty but that table-tennis "felt different right from the beginning". Craig-Martin understands: "There is something about doing something when you just feel some kind of connection with it. It just feels natural."

Two things struck Craig-Martin about Facey-Thompson's success. The role of a strong single mother in unpromising circumstances reminds him



The Paralympic stamp designed by Michael Craig-Martin

of his most famous pupil. "Damien Hirst," he said. "Same thing." Then there's the coach. "If you are really interested in something, and you meet somebody who's a real pro ... it changes everything. That's what Greenhouse does. It puts people together."

The challenge is for Greenhouse to offer more children that opportunity. Facey-Thompson's school also boasts the national girls' Under-16s team, who represented England at a recent world championships. The Great Britain boys' Under-17 team are also Greenhouse-trained.

Thousands of children are doing better with their schoolwork because they do not want to be kicked off their Greenhouse classes.

Michael de Giorgio, who quit a lucrative City career to found Greenhouse in 2002, believes that any school in the

country could emulate that success, given usable space and a coach with the "wow factor". "A mentor who is technically good but can also be a social worker in a tracksuit will change the lives of a lot of children," he said. "We need many more of them."

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Ashley Facey-Thompson, 16 and Michael Craig-Martin, 70, play table tennis

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