



## Tennis for the Visually Impaired Guidance



### Background to tennis for the visually impaired

In January 2007 a delegation of blind and visually impaired tennis players from Japan visited the UK and introduced the sport of Soundball Tennis. Two demonstration sessions were arranged in London, one for juniors and one for adults. The demonstrations were very well received and over the last couple of years we have worked to develop the game in this country. The game is currently being played across London by over thirty visually impaired people; many are members of Metro Blind Sports Club <http://metroblindsport.org>.

### BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Alan Whetherly has been British Blind Sport's regional development officer for young people in the south east since 2008. Working as part of the Big Lottery funded "Seeing A Healthier Future" project, Alan's work has been aimed at increasing the number of blind and visually impaired young people taking part in physical activity. The project is aimed specifically for those aged 11 to 25 but younger people have been included in the project as well.

One of the projects Alan initiated is to establish junior sports clubs specifically aimed at blind and visually impaired young people. The clubs usually meet once a month on a Saturday. We three clubs have been established; based in Aylesbury, Bracknell and Eastbourne. The purpose of these clubs is to provide the young people with the opportunity to experience a variety of sports. One of the most popular sports that we have introduced is tennis.

You might think that tennis isn't the most appropriate sport for a blind or visually impaired person but read on as you will see that we now have an adapted version of the game that uses an audible ball which is fun to play and really inclusive. We also have had three visually impaired coaches take the LTA level 1 course and the Tennis Foundation is developing a coaching module specifically for coaching tennis to blind and visually impaired players. This course will be available from 2011.

### Introducing tennis for the visually impaired.

For the majority of blind and visually impaired young people this has been their first opportunity to access tennis or a racket sport of any kind. The audible ball has made a massive difference and it means that the young people can locate the ball on the court by the sound that it makes. Families are now able to include their visually impaired children in a racket sport along with their sighted siblings.

As this the first experience for many young people of a racket sport, learning Soundball tennis begins with the teaching of key skills and basic shots and movements which allow players to get used to the racket, the Soundball and the size and shape of the court. Training exercises and drills that are used include: bouncing the ball on the floor and catching it, either in two hands or between hand and racquet; bouncing the ball on the racquet; throwing the ball over the net to another player who catches it after two or three bounces, or between hand and racquet; underarm serves over the net to a player who catches the ball; serving against a target on a wall to increase accuracy, and then serving against the wall and returning these serves.

Although the game is currently played indoors in the UK, we know that the Japanese play outdoor tournaments as well. British Blind Sport and members from Metro Blind Sports Club are working with The Tennis Foundation to develop the game so that more blind and visually impaired people can enjoy tennis. The ultimate aim is that anyone can go along and play the game either indoors or outdoors.

## How is the tennis for blind and visually impaired people played?

The game is played with short tennis racquets and an audible foam ball which is slightly larger than a tennis ball. The Soundball Tennis ball has a table tennis ball at its centre containing ball bearings which enable the ball to rattle. The game is currently being played indoors on a badminton court using a short tennis net and the doubles tramline as the court boundary. However, we are trying to develop the game so that it is played on an indoor tennis court.

We play both singles and doubles matches. You can serve either an underarm or overarm serve and the ball must be served diagonally into the court of your opponent. Other adaptations include: the server must ask their opponent if they are 'ready?' and calls out 'play' when the ball is served. A visually impaired player can have two bounces before hitting a return, or three bounces if they are a totally blind player. The scoring is the same as in a mainstream tennis match.

## Coaching a blind or visually impaired player

- Remember to be descriptive in your coaching; gesturing or pointing is not helpful.
- Ensure that visually impaired players can see any demonstrations that you are doing. You may have to demonstrate a skill a couple of times or on a one-to-one basis.
- Check that the player has fully understood the skill you have demonstrated by getting them to practice and show you.
- Be patient, not everyone gets the skill the first time.
- Think about the court area you are using: if it is a light-coloured floor use a black ball / if it is a darker floor use the yellow tennis ball.
- Ensure that there are no obstructions on the court or the area that you are using to teach and make the visually impaired person aware of any potential hazards.
- It is also helpful to ensure that you have colour contrasted clothing so that it is easy to distinguish the ball from your opponent (e.g. wearing light clothing when playing with a dark ball; wearing darker clothing when playing with the yellow ball).

## Where can you get the equipment from?

Most sports shops will sell short handle tennis rackets and the tennis balls are available for purchase from The Tennis Foundation: [disabilitytennis@tennisfoundation.org.uk](mailto:disabilitytennis@tennisfoundation.org.uk).

