

Claire Stancliffe

GB Deaf Footballer

“I’ve played deaf football for the National Deaf Teams since 2007. This is my personal statement of my experiences as a deaf athlete and the discrimination I have felt not being funded compared to other athletes.

I have had the honour of representing my country at 3 Deaflympics, 2 European Championships and 3 World Cups, winning in total 4 bronze medals. I’ve had experience in a variety of settings from completely self funded to having training camps/trips funded but still self funded outside of this.

For the Deaflympics 2009, each athlete was required to raise £2750. I was extremely lucky to receive a lot of support and got this. For my fellow team mates, this was the opposite with some not going because they couldn’t afford to. I had media and supporters asking why we aren’t funded. This was always a difficult conversation to have and despite knowing the reason why, people always said it was a disgrace and we should be fully supported.

Leading on from this, we again had to raise money to attend the Euros 2011 in Bulgaria. This immediately became more difficult as there was embarrassment having to ask the same people for sponsorship/funding. The following year was a massive reality hit. The news that we will not be attending the World Cup due to no funding. The disappointment, the heartbreak was too much for me. With all the money within football and elite sports, a small percentage would have paid for us to go. It didn’t seem fair and this created a lot of anger.



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This started a fire within me to ensure this didn't happen again so for the Deaflympics 2013, I campaigned and got some funding from a charity but we still had to raise our own £2000 per athlete. Success paid off with a Deaflympics bronze medal in our hands.

Fast forward to 2015, devastation hit again. We had no funding and players couldn't afford to go to the Euros 2015 - we ended up taking a very depleted squad of 11. We finished a credible 4th but the players who went were broken physically and mentally. Enough was enough. We couldn't go on like this. Just before Christmas 2015, I was told we can't go to the World Cup 2016. We have no funding. I refused to accept this and said give me 30 days to raise £10,000. After a tiring fundraising campaign where every waking hour I had was spent plugging our funding page in social media, we raised £18,000. We did it. With just 6 months to prepare, we narrowly missed out on a World Cup final. If we had been fully funded athletes, I have no doubt we would of been in the final. Instead of players having to spend time raising money, that valuable time could of been spent training to become the best they can be. We had no support in the sports science department except a volunteer with limited resources.

For the Deaflympics 2017, again we had to fundraise. I took it upon myself to manage/lead the fundraising campaign to raise £100,000 to send the deaf men's and women's squad. Due to all the time spent on fundraising and campaign, I neglected my training. I wasn't the best I could be and felt like I was letting my country down. I didn't have the physicality of an elite athlete because I don't have the resources/funding to train like one.



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At the end of 2017, international politics changed again with Home Nations entering the Euros/Worlds and GB for the Deaflympics. We received the news the FA will fund the England Deaf Men and Women's football squads for the next 4 years and also GB for the Deaflympics 2021. A massive relief for all footballers involved and the sense of "finally". Maybe we will get what we deserve. Whilst training camps, trips and competitions would be funded, away from all this we were still self funded athletes. We were still having to work and find time to train/play around this as well as dealing with everyday life such as family and friends. Huge sacrifices were being made.

In July 2022, the FA stated all deaf women's players needed to be playing National League/Tier 4 level or higher as part of their selection criteria. At that moment in time, I don't think any player was playing that level. And I genuinely believe this is because we are deaf and the difficulties we face. There are no players at Premier League level that are deaf. Why is this? We don't have the same access as hearing players from a young age to an adult.

Clubs are not accessible, players don't accept deaf players that well, many coaches are not deaf aware and we simply could not afford the expenses associated with playing at that level. Personally, I went along to a Tier 2 and Tier 4 club training session. I was invited back, I absolutely loved it. I felt like an elite footballer. But the reality was, I had just been made redundant and I couldn't afford it.



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The travelling was too much. A long day of lipreading followed by a 2 hour round trip minimum with 2 hours of training in between, it was just too much. I wasn't getting home until very late and the next day I was too exhausted. It just wasn't physically possible.

We received no support or funding to make this happen. This knocked my confidence. I'm clearly not good enough. But then I realised it wasn't just me. Other players felt the same and several ended up giving up playing. Players who loved playing football for their country, all of sudden fell out of love because of the pressure to play higher but with no support financially, physically, mentally and emotionally.

We are now faced with a situation again where England Women's Deaf football Team don't have any funding. Back in April 2023, the FA decided they weren't going to continue to run the deaf women's football squad. A devastating decision that has already had a huge impact on current players. After a tireless fundraising campaign and generosity from so many we managed to send a squad to the World Deaf Football Championships in 2023. With just 4 months to gather a team, prepare and fund raise, it was a miracle we even went.

Sadly we lost to Poland in a bronze medal match. The top 3 teams were fully funded. Having to fundraise took all my free time and this meant my training was impacted. I personally was not in the best condition physically due to having to use my training time to fundraise.

For me - how much more do I have to give and sacrifice to represent my country? Am I not good enough? Those sacrifices I made, were they worth it?



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Those 4 bronze medals sat upstairs in my bedroom remind me, it was worth it. I worked hard for those through blood, sweat and plenty of tears. In fact, there should be more medals as we narrowly missed out on several occasions. With funding, would they be 4 bronze medals? Or would they be gold? I genuinely believe we could of had and have the best players/team in the world but that requires funding and support.

Why aren't deaf athletes good enough to receive funding? Why do other disabilities get funding but not us? It's an invisible disability that many assume "isn't that bad" and can't impact on us that much.

What they don't realise is the exhaustion from lipreading or trying to understand people all day, hearing fatigue, the anxiety of not knowing what's going on or not being able to go for a run in the dark due to fear. After a long day at work, I am mentally exhausted and I then have to find the strength/energy to do a training session because I am an athlete. Or am I?

For a lot of my journey, I've never felt a true athlete. I've never reached my full potential because a lot of my energy and time had to be put into fundraising. I will never stop campaigning for deaf athletes to be recognised. We are humans, yes we have a disability but we should be treated the same."



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