I have just emerged from one of the most energetic AGM’s I have ever been to. It’s a Saturday morning and I’ve managed to turn from sluggish to uplifted in a matter of minutes.

I first heard about the 1066 Specials when I visited Westerleigh Judo Club, the President of the club happened to be Harold Lawrence. I recognised Harold from other local events and have in fact heard him speak. As the Chairman of 1066 Specials I thought I’d collar him for a club event we were organising in the area but what I didn’t expect to find out was the decade long work Harold has championed to make sport more inclusive in the local area.

I should point out that Harold isn’t a fan of the word disability, it has negative connotations for him and I can see his point of view.

‘Without exception, we members of the human race are all unique, in other words we are all different, but equal under the skin.’

In 2013 the 1066 Specials received one of the most prestigious awards, the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service, which is an MBE for voluntary groups.

The club has come a long way since its inception in 2003. Harold recognised a need for children and adults with disabilities to have the opportunity to play
football. Since formation, the club has provided football to over 250 young people and adults in the Hastings and Rother area.

I wanted to find out how the club has grown to be so influential. Some of its achievements include being awarded the Sussex Sports Partnership Approved Club status, the Rother Safe Sport Initiative Certificate of Achievement, Football Association Charter Standard Club status and in April 2007 the club achieved charitable status.

The club refer to its supporters, members and volunteers as ‘The Family of the 1066 Specials.’ There is a strong sense of belonging and passion within the room. Volunteers believe in the power of the club and this feeling is palpable.

‘There is one word that springs to mind when talking about the 1066 Specials, and that word is infectious.’

Duncan Nolan, one of the club’s coaches, explains why he loves coaching at the 1066 Specials:

‘I felt unchallenged personally until I met the 1066 Specials. I think I found my calling! There are so many different personalities and abilities. Waking up to coach the Specials whatever the weather or type of session is a pleasure and privilege. The 1066 Specials is my extended family and they have been responsible for making me the coach I am today.’

I’m starting to understand why this club is so highly respected in the community. Ensuring players are having fun is at the heart of what they do.
At the presentation event I attended each coach, starting with the Senior Coach co-ordinator, Paul Anderson (better known as ‘the Gaffer’), made this very point.

‘Let us not forget it’s not all about the winning, although that’s a bonus, but it’s about having lots of fun and working as a team.’ – Kirsty Donno, the Junior Coaching Coordinator

That is not to say they’re not an elite club, they were last season’s winners of the Adult Championship Cup and runners up in Division one of the Adult Sussex Disability Football League, and with this season nearly completed, are top of the Premier League and Adult League.

Harold’s disability work extends further than the 1066 Specials; he also pioneers PODS1066, a charity that stands for the Promotion of Disability Sportspeople. The charity works across the Districts of Rother, Wealden and Hastings to do just that, with aspirations to go far beyond this geographical patch.

‘One can live in the shadow of an idea without grasping it – PODS1066 evolved from a shadow of an idea and I sincerely hope that the sporting community will grasp it.

Simply put PODS1066 is an innovative local charity, with influence throughout Rother, Wealden and Hastings, with a mission to promote disabled sportspeople.’

PODS1066 provide practical support, guidance and assistance to the disabled in the community. Their mission is to inform and educate the wider sporting
community that sports people should not be patronised for their disabilities but deserve to have their talents respected on a basis of equality.

I’m wondering how Harold manages both organisations?

‘I find that I spend too much time picking up the balls rather than keeping them in the air!

The 1066 Specials is not sustained because one person has an idea. It is actually sustained by subsequent people who share the ideals and commit their time and talents to make the process successful.

The 1066 Specials is a good example of ordinary people achieving the extraordinary. The passion and energy of people such as Paul (Senior Coach Coordinator) and Fiona (Club Secretary) provide the foundation on which the future of the Specials will be built.

And likewise with PODS1066 – it is a massive task. Though the dream of equality and inclusivity within sport will probably not be a reality within my lifetime, there is no excuse for not kick-starting the process. Once we succeed in changing perceptions in sport it will automatically have the effect of modifying attitudes towards the physically and intellectually challenged within the wider society.’

The wider community really embrace the club and support its ideals with both the Mayors of Hastings and Bexhill attending the AGM and presentation event, not to mention a number of other local dignitaries. The club is very good at drawing people in and creating a squad of advocates who champion it. This is something that can often be overlooked by many sports clubs.

As I leave the club I feel as if I’ve left something or someone behind. The club gives you a feeling of exhilaration, it’s going places and you can get on the train or get off the tracks because the 1066 Specials are changing perceptions.
If I could bottle this feeling of euphoria and sell it I could easily convince society that sport should be their number one choice when it comes to volunteering.

If you want to get involved with the 1066 Specials or find out more about session times please visit their website: www.1066specials.org.uk
You can also become a supporter of the club and donate to secure its future here.