Tonight Brighton has seen the apocalypse of all rain storms. It’s November, and it got dark at 3.30pm today. I’ve just got absolutely drenched walking from my desk to my car and I’m about to head out into the deluge once again to play table tennis.

This might be an average night for some and you might be into outdoor sports (rather you than me, I’m a fair weather runner) but I can’t help but think I’d quite like to be at home, submerging myself into a hot bath.

But here I stand outside the Fitzherbert’s Centre in Kemptown and not sure what to expect behind the very cool graffiti decorated door. On the left is the Brighton Table Tennis Club post box and I can hear the distant murmur of a table tennis ball making contact with a table, so I’m definitely in the right place.

I’m here to talk to Tim Holtam co-founder of the club, to see what all the fuss is about and to share with you the secret to their successful club.

If you don’t know, Brighton Table Tennis Club has been on the receiving end of many many awards including the Table Tennis England Club of the Year Award in 2014. They are renowned across Brighton and I wanted to find out a bit more out their founder Tim and how they’ve made Brighton the table tennis capital of the South.

Having recently moved their club to the Fitzherbert’s Centre from Brighton Youth Club you’d think they’d been here years. T-shirts, signed bats, banners and pictures all adorn the walls. The main hall is at capacity with seven tables all being played on. Tonight is their dedicated female only session.

It’s a large venue with two halls, a kitchen, storage area and loo. Tim explains the kitchen where we’re currently sitting was full to the ceiling with trash and rats. I become slightly more aware of my surroundings at this point.

After a tour and a quick rat check (all clear) I make us a cup of tea and sit down with Tim. No time has passed before Tim is pulled away to sort something out, he’s a popular guy round here! Co-
founder, chair, lead coach, motivator, the list goes on. I’m not sure you could summarise his position here at the club into one official role.

I ask him when they started the club, he remembers the exact date with no hesitation:

“26 February 2007. Me and Harry McCarney started it. I met him at Brighton University, I was at Sussex University and there wasn’t anything going on there, so we went to the youth club got two old tables and it grew from there.”

Now Brighton Table Tennis Club is a registered charity who host Ping! Brighton a mass participation event each summer involving over 10,000 people in the city. Not to mention their club membership is in the hundreds and they’ve got thousands of people playing the sport across the city.

Their new venue allows them exclusive use seven days of the week and boy are they abusing this. Their timetable is full of sessions for social play, elite, kids, older people, disabled people, advanced and invitational there’s even the first ever LGBT session. This is still not enough for Tim.

“We’d like to be more multi-cultural, diversity adds so much value. Sport is a universal language.”

Tim’s not a Brighton native, born and raised in London he moved to the coast for university when he was 20, but he now calls Brighton home. He started playing table tennis at the young age of 8 and credits his first coach Laurie Laken a youth worker and table tennis coach from the Isle of Dogs in East London with getting him involved in the club.

It’s clear Tim has been lucky enough to have a number of admirable mentors who have guided and shaped his young self.

“I learnt a lot from Anthony Jones, who was my form tutor for seven years at Pimlico School, a true comprehensive school.”

He studied history, gaining a masters degree from Sussex University but was more interested in the youth of the city and ended up teaching at Patcham High School.

“What has been so good about Patcham High School is that Nancy Meaker and other colleagues and bosses have allowed me the space and opportunity to develop the Table Tennis both in and outside of school.”

Being in contact with students day in day out certainly helped Tim gauge interest in the sport and encourage young people to take up table tennis.

“At lunch time there were 80 kids playing, there is a buzz at Patcham High School, its growing fast.”

Being around Tim for any length of time inspires you to do more, be more, achieve more, play table tennis more. You want to be part of the club and the social network it provides. There’s something
warm about the club that makes you feel instantly welcome, whether it’s your first time or hundredth.

“We feel we’re on the verge of something huge, we just need to keep going. We’ve got over a thousand people playing across Brighton through all our sessions out in the community.”

It’s clear Tim has a role model that inspired him to start one of the most successful clubs in the South and that person was Jon Kaufman. Jon create London Progress Table Tennis club that has produced many top players of recent times.

“You need to generate a buzz, instil people a love, for anything, it doesn’t matter if its table tennis. Jon Kaufman at London Progress table tennis did that for me. Its all come from one person, who has instilled that level of passion. When you think, why am I giving up my weekends I think, if I could do 1% of what Jon Kaufman did then its worth it, you need that reference point.”

Tim recognises the value of volunteers, and credits the club’s success to the network of coaches and volunteers that helped him to make it happen.

“The key to our club is me and Harry did it together, and with the help of our volunteer coaches we’ve created something special here. We treat our volunteers with respect, offer free membership, free kit and excite them about the projects going on at the club.”

Other than making the club more multi-cultural Tim would like to concentrate on female participation and grow this side of the club. He estimates their current female membership is at 20%, in two years’ time he would like this to be at 50%.

“There aren’t enough women on posters and flyers who can really encourage more females to play table tennis. We have a newly qualified female coach who will become a role model but we need to work out how best to engage more females. There’s no reason why more women and girls can’t get involved, table tennis is for everyone.”

No idea is too small, no barrier too big for Tim. You know he will achieve everything he sets out to do it’s just a matter of time.

Tim credits much of his success to his close family, two brothers, a sister and supportive parents who instilled values about community and social justice. This has absolutely been reflected in the club and the way it operates.
“The club is a family, but not just with sport, but with career choices and general life advice. There are lots of people in the club that haven’t got that support system at home but at the club we can provide that support. There is a community here, a support network, we’re always open.”

His advice to anyone wanting to start a club is:

“Do it! It’s the best thing I’ve ever done and the best thing you’ll ever do. This is ours, we’re in control of it, we feel we can make decisions, get lots done, grow it, and we feel it will get even bigger.”

Boy am I glad I came out tonight! I’ve forgotten all about the storm outside.

Tim’s enthusiasm is infectious and quickly rubs off on you. It’s hard not to sign your life away to the club immediately, and the difference is, you’ll want to.

There really is a community here, a place to make friends, to share the love of a sport and to have fun. Tim feels he owes much of his success to Jon Kaufman but I think he’s being all too modest. Jon has certainly been a huge influence but this is all Tim, unwavering in his vision for the club.

With a long term venue secured, the club continues to conquer Brighton, but what’s next I wonder? I’ve got a feeling Brighton and Hove is going to get all too small for a force of nature like this club. We’ll have to watch this space to see what comes next but trust me when I say, it’s going to be epic!

Please check out Brighton Table Tennis Club’s website for upcoming session times
http://www.brightontabletennisclub.co.uk/