“We are a family run judo club, established in 1995. We train main stream and special needs judo players on the mat at the same time, because we believe that here, everyone is the same.”

At first glance you wouldn’t know which participants have special needs and which don’t, and that’s the way Paul likes it.

I’m here to meet Paul Everest, head coach of Westerleigh Judokwai Club. I’ve come to find out why this club was the only sporting group in the country to be awarded the Queens MBE for Voluntary Service in 2015. After meeting Paul for just a couple of hours this becomes clear very quickly.

“I want to get the mainstream guys to appreciate disability and the people with disabilities to think, I can do that!”

Paul established the club in 1995, after a string of injuries – not through judo funnily enough – but through football, it became obvious to Paul that his competition days were over and coaching was the route he wanted to go down.

As the membership form states this is a family run club. As I arrive I decide to approach the person who looks most in charge, she turns out to be Janet, Paul’s mum!

Janet describes her role at the club as a ‘dog’s body’, she comes to every session three times a week. After observing her for two out of the three sessions in the week little does she know she’s actually the face of the club. She welcomes members, takes the subs, keeps the paperwork in order and ensures key messages are communicated at the end of the session. From the outside Janet is the glue, she’s holding everything together.

Paul has been coaching now for over 30 years but he isn’t a ‘regular’ coach – if there is such a thing!
“I’ve been lucky – I’ve been to four World Games and numerous other European Championships. Since 2006 there hasn’t been a year the club hasn’t won something, from county, regional, national to international level.”

Wait hold on, World Championships, European Championships? I didn’t realise I was visiting a club that had achieved medals on this scale.

“We’ve had 4 World Games titles, 5 World Champions, 24 silver medals, 6 bronze and a fourth place.”

Paul’s coached several players to global success. He’s trained five world champions, three of those coming from Westerleigh.

He is the Special Olympics National Coaching and Competition Advisor for Judo. If you’re not aware of the Special Olympics it’s the world’s largest sports organisation for people with intellectual disabilities. It spans 170 countries with over 4.5 million athletes competing. It’s quite outstanding and incomprehensible to sit with a coach like Paul and to be in the same room as a world champion who is training just metres away from me.

I ask Paul, how do you get to such a high level of coaching?

“My uncle was tiling the Special Olympics South East regional chair’s bathroom and he asked my uncle if he knew someone that coaches’ judo, it started from there. I was asked to start a team to take to the World Games in Ireland in 2003, I had just 10 months to prepare.”

And he did it! One of his team members, James, won the first ever British Special Needs title!

Last year he brought home one gold and two silver medals from the Special Olympics held in Los Angeles.

Even though Paul has been responsible for bringing judo into the Special Olympics he is as humble as ever and only wants recognition for the players. The one thing I observe about Paul is that doesn’t matter whether you’re a beginner, disabled, able bodied, or a world champion – he will treat you exactly the same and give you his undivided attention.

By day Paul is a paramedic, it strikes me it’s quite a good profession to go alongside such a high contact sport. However Paul’s had more injuries through football that judo!

I wonder how he juggles such an important job along with his voluntary responsibilities at the club and raising a family all at the same time.

“I’m lucky because we’ve got seven coaches altogether. These guys support me – if I didn’t have these guys I wouldn’t be able to do it.”

The family feel is at the very core of the club. Players who are injured will still turn up to sessions just to have a coffee and a chat. I think it also helps that they heavily advertise their open door policy.
You can turn up anytime any week and be welcomed with open arms. One player travels as far as Surrey for a weekly session.

“When I first started in the ambulance service a guy told me to wait 5 years then take your paramedic qualification. There is nothing you won’t see in 5 years, it will better prepare you, you will have seen most things by then.

My first coach had a similar attitude – he said that to be the best coach you can be, get people better than you. So that’s my ambition – to make people better than me. If my players can be better than I was then I’m achieving something.”

And that’s no mean feat, Paul competed regional and nationally and he’s also a black belt.

I wonder how can you top winning The Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service – the highest award given to volunteer groups in the UK?

Paul was speaking to fellow coaches about this and they have reached the conclusion that they can’t top a year like 2015 but they can still improve.

“We’re going to carry on breaking down barriers, making ourselves more accessible to more people, encouraging more parents who can sometimes be the barrier.”

Paul goes on to tell me that sometimes parents are the barrier to disabled participants taking part. Paul lives by the motto that if you’re not on the mat then you’re not taking part in judo.

“We have a kid called Oscar who is profoundly disabled, he communicates via blinking. I use his dad as a buddy during sessions and now Oscar has just achieved his yellow belt. If they don’t come through the door we can’t teach them!”

Pauls attitude towards able bodied, disabled and participants with special needs is the same. Bring them to the session and he’ll do the rest. I guarantee by the end of it they will all spend time on the mat.

What is different about this club is the very real inclusive attitude. Every member trains together regardless of their disability. Attitudes are being changed and that’s what is most impressive. Life lessons are being taught, lessons that can be taken outside of the sport.

How I would describe this club is they literally mean what they say, they practice what they preach. When they say they are a family run club that is 100% true. This is taken to the extreme when I hear that one of the participants who was being fostered by Paul’s mum at the time, was adopted by a couple at the club! This club has literally changed lives!
“I like to think we change lives for the better. I hope they are benefitting from sport but also that they achieve so much through the sport. I strive to get the best out of people.”

On the outside it’s a humble judo club, but on the inside it’s a highly ambitious, champion brewing, family orientated, inclusive, diverse club that make it not only somewhere you train but somewhere you want to hang out, somewhere you learn about life, and somewhere you can call a second home.

Westerleigh Judokwai Club train at Claverham Community College, located in the gym, North Trade Road, Battle, TN33 0HT. Session days are Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturdays. For full details see their website: www.westerleighjudo.org.uk or email Paul Everest paulapauleverest@hotmail.com.

Westerleigh Judokwai Club were runners up for the Grand Hotel Club of the Year Award at the Sussex Sports Awards held on 27 November at The Grand Hotel, Brighton.