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Engaging disabled women key focus at Sussex Disability Sports Network

Special Olympics Eastbourne athlete Georgina Lee and Limitless FC founder and player Jess Barnes were star motivators at the Sussex Disability Sports Network event 2018 this week.

Engaging more disabled women in sport and physical activity was the main focus at this year's event held at the Sussex County Cricket Club on Tuesday 25 September.

Georgina and Jess featured in a special question time, hosted by Aroop Tanna, Sussex Cricket Foundation's Disability Cricket Manager. The sport-loving duo advised and inspired the event's delegates with their own personal stories about becoming involved in sport despite facing many challenges.

Georgina, who is asthmatic and has epilepsy, started attending Special Olympic sessions in 2001 and now competes in the 100m, 100m relay, Shot Put and Standing Long Jump. Georgina is also a talented Sussex Disability Cricket player, attending her first session in 2015.

"Once I started playing sport I just haven't stopped and love it now," Georgina said. "It's about making activity and sport fun, varied and all inclusive. I used to hate the idea of the Shot [Shot Put] four years ago but now I can throw the furthest in the Eastbourne team."

Jess, Vice and Fixtures Secretary for the Sussex County FA Disability League, has various disabilities including brittle asthma, a neurological condition called IIH [Idiopathic Intracranial Hypertension] and a prolapsed disc in her back.

"Life hasn't been that easy... I've spent a lot of time in hospital but I've always stayed positive and tried to be as upbeat as possible. I get through by having a "how to attitude" instead of "can't do" one."

"A lot of sports are traditionally male dominated so it would be great to break the mould and have more women at the forefront of sports which would in turn would attract more. It's very important where possible to meet people face-to-face. People might be really anxious about joining up for things because going into a room full of people you don't know or starting a new sport can be very daunting."

Both Georgina and Jess highlighted the positive impact sport has played in their lives and both have coaching aspirations for the future.

"I would like to become a full time coach for my Special Olympics team and this is the next move because I have just been diagnosed with hypo-disability in my knee," Georgina said.

Jess, added: "Not that long ago I was emailing round asking about what was available to me and now I am aiming to be the coach as well... Sport has changed my life in so many positive ways!"

The fifth Sussex Disability Sports Network event opened with SDSN updates, delivered by Gemma Finlay-Gray, Active Sussex's Strategic Relationship Manager, and Paul Brackley, Albion in the Community's Disability Manager.

Gemma then delivered a presentation on the topic: 'Open Data: Getting your opportunities out there!' [The OpenActive Initiative funded by Sport England](#), developed by the Open Data Institute, is a community-led initiative of sport and physical activity organisations and individuals, using open data to help people get active.

"It was great to see lots of new people in the room. The Sussex Disability Sports Network is run by champions of the network for the network, to increase knowledge around specific, relevant topics and allow for networking across sectors to encourage collaboration and sharing of best practice, which we saw in action," said Gemma.

Chris Whitaker, Activity Alliance's Engagement Advisor, followed on with Activity Alliance updates including their vision for making disabled people active for life as part of the '2017 – 2021 Vision, Purpose and Outcomes'.

Insight examples from the Football Association and Women in Sport, were delivered by Clare Nichols, Sussex County FA's Football Development Officer, with focus on how to sustain and grow participation in sport for females with a disability.

Also featured at the Sussex Disability Sports Network 2018 was insight, discussions, feedback around females in disability sports, plus facilitated table sessions and networking.

See photos from the event [HERE](#).

Make sure you are [signed up to receive the latest Sussex Disability Sports Network updates](#).