

**‘LAW-N BOWLS’: HOW I MANAGED THIS  
‘NOT-SO-AVERAGE’ COMBINATION**

***Natalie Melmore***

As a young girl I loved every sport going, I represented my school in football, athletics and swimming and had county trials for the later two, but for some reason it was lawn bowls that stuck. I started playing at nine years of age at a local club every Saturday morning, but after making the under 25 England team at the age of fourteen I have never looked back. Being an active sportswoman and attempting to balance a work-sport-university life was always going to be tough, but my first two years of university were a serious struggle. Living at home and commuting for over two hours every day made it extremely difficult to complete my work to the standard I knew I could produce. My time management skills have always been below average but travelling down on the train with a draft essay and a red pen the morning of the hand in date for a piece of coursework definitely was not ideal (and I certainly would not recommend it!).

After being selected to represent England in the ladies singles for the 2010 Commonwealth Games (CWG) in lawn bowls, held in Delhi, I decided that the best course of action would be to take a year out of university and focus 100% on my training, rather than trying to split my time between my final year and bowls. Bowls England, the national body, had planned a variety of overseas competitions which would take up around 8 weeks of term time and previous experience had taught me that this was just far too much.

It is fair to say that I had an amazing year. After travelling to Australia I lived and played bowls in Melbourne for two months, in which time the England squad had a test series against Australia as part of our preparation. We also went to Spain to play their national side and had various weekend practice sessions. To prepare for the Indian climate we spent a day in and out of the ‘sweat chamber’ (as it was later named) at Loughborough which was not a pleasant experience. On my non-bowls travels I also ended up in Morocco, Canada and Fiji before our outdoor season started at home in May.

I spent the majority of my summer working and bowling (unfortunately there is NO money in the sport), as well as trying and subsequently failing to produce a working title for my final year dissertation. We left for Delhi in mid-September and were the first (along with the men’s hockey team) to arrive. We were hounded by the press looking for comments about the athletes’ village ‘situation’ the moment we stepped outside the airport. After spending a few

days recovering from our jet lag and acclimatising in an amazing 7 star hotel we moved into the village, which was unfortunately incomplete (they were starting to plant trees as we were leaving!). It was such a shame because the efforts of the Indian people had been phenomenal, but after a late running wet season there was a tremendous struggle to complete the accommodation before the athletes arrived. Nevertheless, after a bit of good old fashioned elbow grease we managed to clean up our flat and it looked reasonable; which was all we needed. The singles was the last lawn bowls event to take place at the greens, so the men's singles player Sam Tolchard and I had two weeks before our competition even started. We spent the majority of our time training on the delegated practice greens, but also were able to watch some of the other sports taking place, including athletics and hockey which was a real bonus.

The Wi-Fi facilities in the village were at best, dubious, but there were dedicated computer rooms available where I was able to get some work done (as long as the neighbourhood pests, the mosquitoes among other things, didn't disturb me too much). I spent many evenings aimlessly wondering around with my laptop under my arm trying to find a space with a plug socket to get some work done, but did normally manage to grab a chair before a Facebook fiend got there first.

Once the competition had started there was little time to think about work, let alone actually get any done. The schedule was hectic, and after playing 3 games of bowls in a 40 degree heat day there was no energy left to do anything but eat once we arrived back in the village. I realise that most of you are probably reading this will be thinking 'bowls – strenuous?', but trust me, it was a gruelling experience. The worst part about it was getting back to the rooms after a really long day and having to try and sleep in what I can only describe as a lumpy piece of concrete!

The CWG was the most stressful experience of my life and I must admit that the competition itself was not enjoyable because of the expectation in representing a previously extremely successful country. The rest of the team had finished and had all medalled so the pressure was really on to 'bring home the bacon'. The only time I was able to relax was when my opponent missed with her last bowl in the final and I knew I had won the gold medal. It was extremely emotional!

I must admit, that up until my third year I was no model student, but after taking a year out I was determined to amend my ways. I moved down to Plymouth into a house share, not ten minutes walk from the university. It certainly made life easier and I was able to lock myself in

my room and become an academic hermit. In February I was lucky enough to head to 'down under' again for the Australian Open and a Tri-nations test series against Scotland and Australia. Unfortunately, this meant I had to take just over three weeks off from my studies, but all of my lecturers were fantastic and supported my decision whole-heartedly. It did mean that I had to take work with me (which some of the ABC commentators mentioned when I was caught reading my company law book whilst watching the men's pairs), but I did manage to keep up with all my reading and group work whilst I was away.

My decision to accept the invitation for this trip was mainly because I was, and am still hoping to move out there next year. Any success I achieved on the trip is only helping my cause now. There are many opportunities to work within bowls in Australia and earn a reasonable living whilst being able to take off as much time as is necessary to compete in tournaments. As much as I want to stay in the UK and continue on with a career in law, any hope I have of being able to play bowls to the level that I am now at in this industry is not realistic and the governing body cannot afford to fund all (or any) of the elite bowlers in the Country due to the lack of funding they are given from Sport England. Considering we medalled in five out of six disciplines in Delhi, and are the most highly medalled country competing in lawn bowls this is a very frustrating and disappointing fact and it is not surprising that some of our brightest talents are upping sticks and moving abroad.

Whether I have a career in law or not in Australia, Plymouth Law School has given me invaluable life experience and has proven to be completely dedicated to students who need their support and advice. A special thanks must go to Professors Peter Shears and Kim Stevenson, who were both always there to give me a well needed kick when I needed it. I will be forever grateful. Plymouth University is the best choice I could have made and I urge every student reading this to put 100% into whatever you do. Anything worth having in life is worth working hard for.