

The idea of the plucky deaf person transcending their difficulties to live a life even more fulfilled than the hearing community often has more to do with charity advertising than with real life. But occasionally somebody who barely seems to know that they can't hear gives heart to us all - Martin Bogard is one of them.

Martin Bogard is an international badminton champion. As well as being a full-time travelling engineer, husband of Malka and father of Ralph and Gillian.

Whichever way you look at it he is a success. But is probably even more proud of his family than of his sporting achievements.

Martin was born deaf, so he was freed from the traumas that come with becoming deaf in later life. So when the phone rings he doesn't feel frustrated that he can't hold a conversation, but pleased because he has learned to tell the caller to ring again at a specific time when his hearing son will be at home.

He has the kind of attitude that motivates him to find things that he can do well in life, and ignore those that he can't, which is something that's equally applicable to

any human being, whatever their strengths, weaknesses or disabilities.

The trick is to acknowledge that you have a disability, and to realise that you don't have to suffer from it.

By the age of 17 Martin had found his place in the hearing world, at Brooklands Technical College in Weybridge, although his education started in deaf schools at Westham and Burwood Park.

He played all kinds of sports at school, but says that he was "rubbish". It was later in his teens that he became seriously interested in badminton and learned to outplay everyone at Brooklands, whether they could hear or not.

Good vibrations

But why badminton? He firmly dismisses the idea that it's a game particularly well suited to deaf people, because a shuttlecock makes less noise than, say a squash or tennis ball, making any disadvantage faced by deaf people less of a problem. Instead, Martin claims that vibrations through the floor are more important.

On finding badminton to be his sport, Martin's skills increased quickly, and before long he could beat anyone who would give him a casual game. Since the only way to improve is to set higher targets, by playing with better players, he moved to what he describes as "the best badminton club in Essex", at Redbridge sports centre.



Play it again Martin

Renowned for its high standards, Martin had to play his way into the club. "My father telephoned to say that I wanted to play my way in, explained that I was deaf, and after three weeks' trial my membership was confirmed," he said.

At the same time he also joined a second hearing club and the Green Lanes deaf club, where he also played football.

In short, he soon became one of the best deaf players in the country. In fact, he is second best, after Maidstone's Rodney Fletcher, who seems to be the Bjorn Borg to Martin's John McEnroe.

Ambitions abroad

His ambitions soon went well beyond these shores. Martin's first venture abroad was to a deaf people's competition in Copenhagen where he beat Denmark and Sweden in the men's doubles - with Rodney Fletcher as his partner - and the mixed doubles with Eugenie Dalton from Broadstairs.

There followed a number of other international competitions, and a particular highlight was when he was successful in an international hearing competition. In 1981 he was the only deaf player out of 3,500 people at the 11th Maccabiah Games, a kind of Jewish Olympics held every four years in Israel.

A lot of record-breaking professional international players are Jewish, so when the British team won the gold medal the achievement was particularly outstanding and endorsed the view that Martin isn't suffering at all from his disability.

Playing in international tournaments means travelling and staying away from home. As a well seasoned traveller Martin has a few tips for deaf people going abroad. "The first thing to do is say 'excuse me, I am deaf' whoever you are dealing with - whether at the check-in desk, a hotel, or indeed an international sports competition. You simply can't expect people to help unless they know you have a disability."

Returning to Martin's catalogue of success, by the time he went to Los Angeles he was married to Malka, who he met when he went to Israel in 1977 with the Jewish Deaf Association, where he is chairman of the members committee.

The year before he had played in the World Games for the Deaf in Los Angeles. This was a particularly expensive venture, but he was helped by the British Deaf Sports Council and the Jewish deaf Association (JDA).

It was the first time that badminton had been included in the games and he chose to go to the USA rather than to the 12th Maccabiah in Israel, feeling that he ought to encourage deaf people, particularly since he felt that the JDA had been especially helpful to him. Since then he founded, and now runs, their sports club.

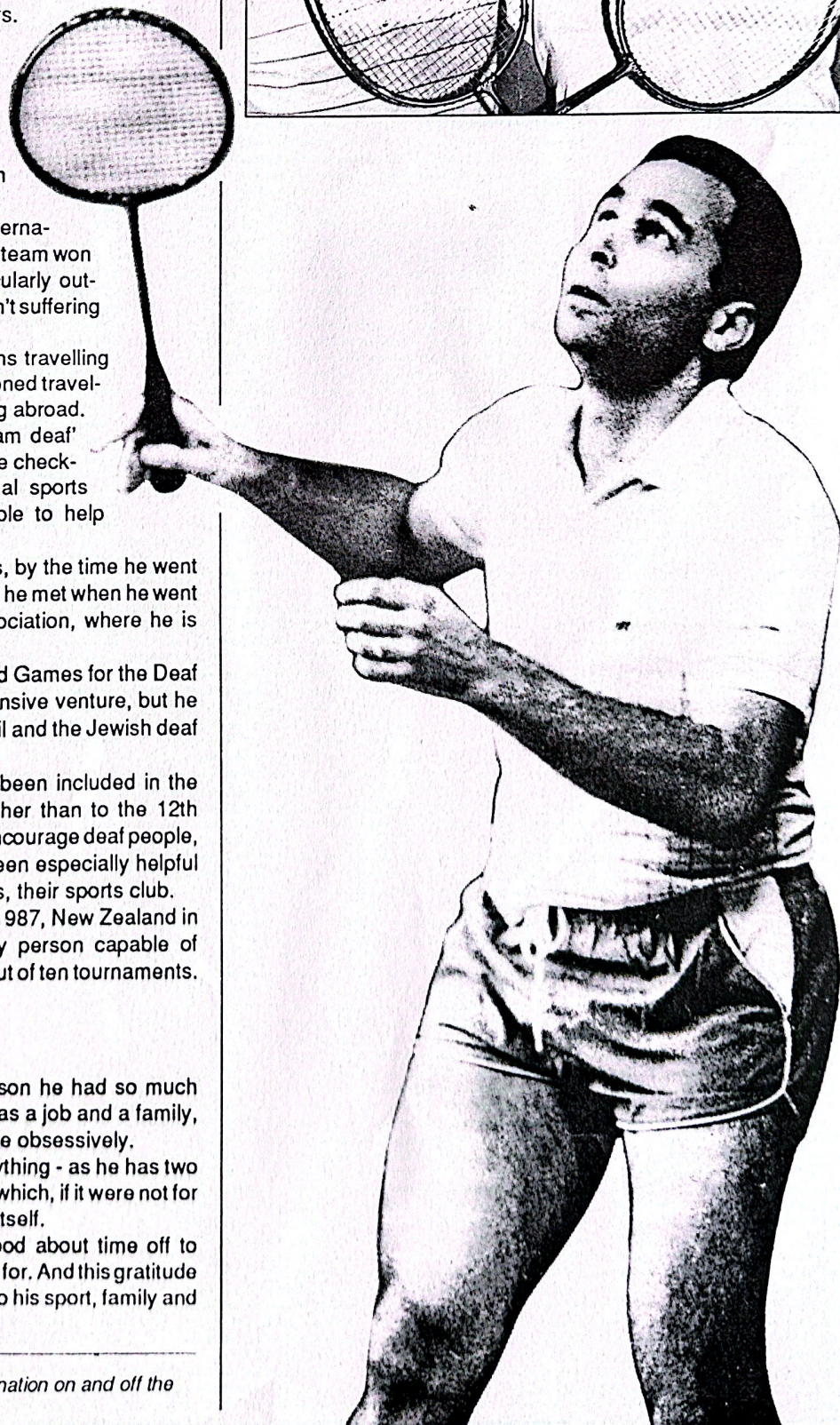
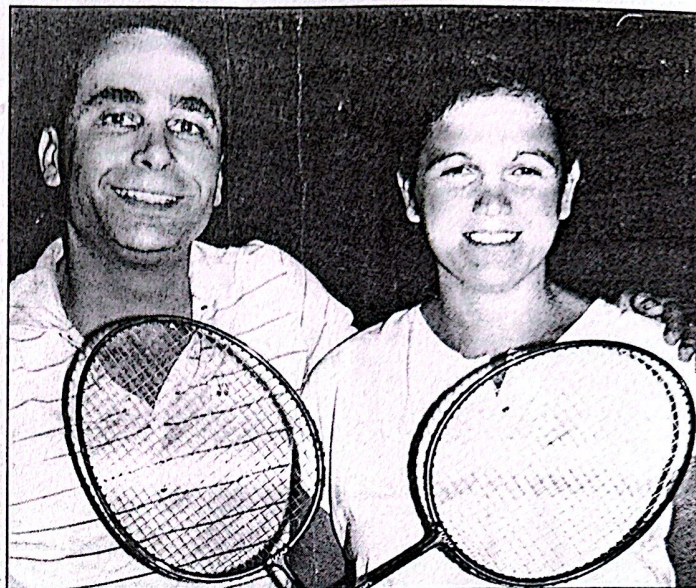
And the story goes on...with Stockholm in 1987, New Zealand in 1989, with Rodney Fletcher being the only person capable of beating him - and regularly doing so for nine out of ten tournaments.

Success story

Martin feels, rightly or wrongly, that the reason he had so much trouble with Rodney is the fact that he also has a job and a family, whereas Rodney is single and practices more obsessively.

But he doesn't need to be a winner in everything - as he has two wonderful hearing children, and a regular job which, if it were not for the badminton, would be a success story in itself.

His employers, Océ Copiers, are very good about time off to pursue his hobby, which Martin is very grateful for. And this gratitude shows, as he brings the same determination to his sport, family and work.



Above right: Martin and Malka - a winning combination on and off the badminton court.