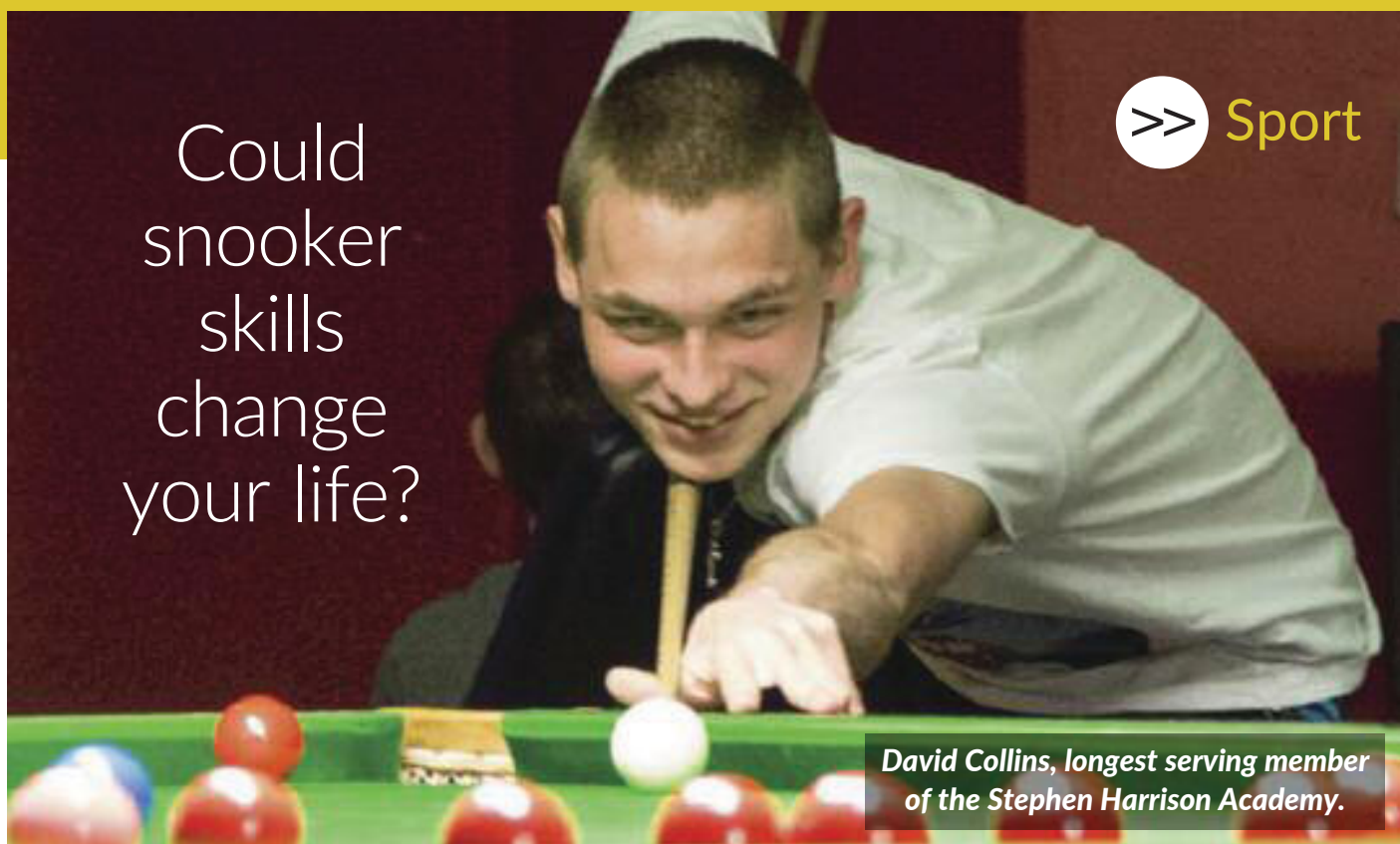


Could
snooker
skills
change
your life?

>> Sport



Join the Cue

FORMER PROFESSIONAL SNOOKER player Steve Harrison works relentlessly to give young adults with learning difficulties their big break.

Sheffield-based Steve, 47, laid down his cue after 12 years on the professional circuit to set up a grassroots scheme in his local area that's transformed the lives of hundreds of young people and won him an MBE in the process.

Steve was inspired by, and shines with pride when he talks about his father, Ray, a paraplegic gold medallist in 1985 who believed that grassroots snooker was a great social leveller and could be the catalyst to change lives for good. Ray was a keen sportsman who played football for Sheffield United and loved a game of cricket, before being diagnosed with polio at the age of 17.

Steve set up his first snooker club in 2007, as a social enterprise, aimed at helping local youngsters who might have trouble participating in other sports.

"It's easy to work your way around a snooker table," Steve explains. "There's something to hold on to, so mobility isn't an issue and you're very close to the action. Snooker's easy to learn and you can

develop a range of skills as you progress. And that's without the other activities that we've developed that can help with numeracy, literacy and social skills: it's a really versatile and educational way to spend valuable time."

Soon after Steve set up his club, the Stephen Harrison Academy, he was approached by Sheffield Council who asked him if he could host sessions for adults with learning difficulties. The service soon expanded to young people aged between 18 – 25 and Steve now works with more than 35 youngsters.

"We're proud of what we do at the moment but we're constrained by our facilities," explains Steve, who runs the academy from the first floor of Walkley Community Centre, three miles from Sheffield city centre. "There are accessibility issues and we're currently trying to raise £40,000 to find a new home so we can help more young people.

"I get emails and phone calls from dozens of parents every week who've read or heard about the work we do. With better facilities we could work with more young people locally, help

We've changed the lives of so many young people thanks to dad's legacy that I've lost count.



Steve Harrison with a picture of his father Ray (top right), with his MBE (left), and with members of the Stephen Harrison Academy.

train franchisees who could run services in other parts of the country and employ more staff to open our clubs for longer hours.

"When anyone comes to visit, they quickly realise it's about much more than a game of snooker. It's a game that gives them the chance to get better at numeracy, to improve their vocabulary and to grow their confidence."

Several of the young people Steve's worked with

have grown so attached to the club that they stay once their regular sessions come to an end, training as coaches and volunteering to work with Steve's latest intakes.

They're complemented by Steve's extended family, with huge support through the year from his four children, Katie, Lucy, Elise and Harry and notably his aunt, Maureen Green, still a driving force in the organisation at the age of 81.

He's also actively supported by some local businesses, including recruitment experts TribePad.

"We've changed the lives of so many young people thanks to Dad's legacy that I've lost count," Steve smiles. "Sheffield's the natural home of snooker, with plans to host the World

Championships until 2027.

"It would be great to grow the grassroots, community aspect of the sport so it gains the same recognition and brings joy, learning, better mental health and the chance to play sport for as wide a range of people as possible." ●

Joe's story: from his nan's passenger seat to National Champion

JOE BELL IS just one of the Stephen Harrison Academy (SHA) success stories; in just two short years, he's learnt the sport, won national recognition and now coaches others to pass on the skills he's learnt.

Joe joined the academy's Disability Snooker Group in 2017: various health issues meant he was nervous about leaving his house, so rarely went out. His first visits to the club were thanks to his nan, who drove him to and from his sessions.

"Joe was really shy at first – he had trouble communicating with others and had certainly never picked up a snooker cue before," explains Steve Harrison, who runs the SHA. "Gradually, he started to ask questions and then wanted to know everything about the sport, how to strike the ball, how to stand and how to win."

From having few friends and little confidence, Joe struck up close relationships with some of



I love the game: it relaxes me and makes me feel good.

the other academy players, with whom he plays regularly.

In 2018, Joe enrolled onto the academy's UK Snooker Awards programme, a six-step programme covering a range of skills from basic snooker techniques to modules on nutrition, literacy, numeracy, psychological techniques and public speaking.

After graduating the same year, Joe went on to win the National Junior

Disability Snooker Championships.

"I love the game: it relaxes me and makes me feel good," explains Joe. You know when you win it's a great feeling and even sometimes if I lose it makes me want to practise more to get better. If I hadn't joined the Disability Snooker Group I probably would have never picked up a cue."

Before starting with the academy, Joe's nan was his transport manager, taking him to places because he was too nervous to travel alone. But now? Joe plays in two snooker leagues in the evenings and travels independently around Sheffield to get to his matches, is the captain of one of the teams and attends monthly league meetings.

"We're so proud of Joe and his progress," said Steve. "Through his own efforts and determination, he's found a way to overcome his difficulties and his interest in this accessible sport will help to shape his future."

Find out more

The Stephen Harrison Academy offers a range of activities for young people with physical and learning difficulties. To find out more, visit their website <http://www.snookerskills.com/> ●

