

Losing the power of sight hasn't dimmed these stars' love of sport

FAITH IN SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

All too many folk see blind people as seriously handicapped and thus unable to take part in sports. Yet many are far fitter than many 20-20 eye-sighted people.

British Blind Sport (BBS) helps blind and partially sighted people to get active and play sport. BBS encourages adults and children to participate in activities at all levels, from grassroots to the Paralympic Games.

Weight training

Weight training is a common means of exercise for a blind and partially sighted individual as it requires little start-up expenses and can be achieved at home.

Weight training is one of the most natural means of physical activity for individuals with visual impairments. Those wanting to compete also have the option of doing so in both able-bodied power-lifting competitions and competitions for blind individuals.

Climbing

Climbing can be adapted for all disabilities, and hoists are available to make tackling the walls achievable for everyone. Wheelchair users, or people with no mobility, can be directly hoisted from their chair to the top of the wall.

You may have asked yourself whether a blind person has ever climbed Mt Everest? One did at 10am Nepal time on 25th May, 2001, when Erik Weihenmayer became the only blind man ever to stand on the summit of Mt. Everest.

Then there is a blind man who has climbed Yosemite's El Capitan – in a day.

In 2016 Erik Weihenmayer became the first blind person to climb El Capitan in a day (24 hours or less). He was accompanied by an elite team of climbers and mountaineers, including Hans Florine, who has ascended El Capitan a record 177 times; Timmy O'Neill, Geoff Tabin, and Charley Mace.

The team chose East Buttress for their route, the shortest line up El Cap. It comprises of 11 pitches and 1,500 vertical feet. "I wanted something I could free climb," says Weihenmayer, a 2015 National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, "and the length of East Buttress made me feel somewhat confident that I could do it in a day."

He needn't have worried about time. Weihenmayer and team set a blistering pace, passing another team of sighted climbers on the



The towering rockface of El Capitan in Yosemite was climbed in less than a day by blind climber Erik Weihenmayer (pictured below)

the goalkeepers can be either sighted or partially sighted.

Running

Blind runners can be fast. David Brown is known as the world's fastest completely blind runner. He was diagnosed with Kawasaki disease at 15 months old, which led him to completely lose his sight by age 13. Brown says he was "living in fear for a number of years" — until he discovered his passion for running.

Brown competed in the 2012 Summer Paralympics, reaching the semi-finals in both the 100 meters and 200 meters. Besides athletics, he trained in wrestling and goalball and plays the drums, piano and tenor saxophone in a jazz band.

Cycling

Many a good idea begins in a pub, over a pint. And so it was, that in October 2013, a couple of the founder members met and decided to form a specialist cycling club, dedicated to providing tandem riding for blind and visually impaired cyclists.

Tandem Trekkers was established shortly thereafter.

For the first four years, the group was a project run under the umbrella of KVIN (Kirklees Visual Impairment Network). But, as more and more riders joined us, the need to become an independently constituted club became increasingly apparent.

And when those lovely people at Healthbloom approved their application for grant funding, they successfully applied to the Charity Commission and became a registered charity in their own right in October 2017. (Registered Charity Number 1175326).

Their core membership today numbers some 50 riders and they warmly welcome new pilots and stokers. They manage their own fleet of just over 20 tandems, which is boosted by the fact that several of the members ride their own bikes.

You might now be tempted – inspired? – to set up near you what has been achieved in Yorkshire where "Tandem trekkers, West Yorkshire", operate.

If you're interested in coming along to one of our sessions, or would simply like to find out more about them, please don't hesitate to get in touch at hello@tandemtrekkers.org.uk



route, and topping out shortly after 3pm, about eight hours after they began.

Weihenmayer, 48, started climbing when he was a teen, shortly after losing his sight to juvenile retinoschisis. The sport proved a surprisingly good fit. "It's very tactile," says Weihenmayer. "And the goal is pretty straightforward, to move your body from point A to point B."

His latest record is particularly satisfying, as it marks the 20th anniversary of his first El Cap climb with Florine. The two paired up in 1996 to attempt the first blind ascent of the Nose route, a more difficult line that spans 32 pitches across 3,000 vertical feet. It took them four days.

The feat remains unrepeated, in fact—no other blind person has even attempted the Nose.

In between the two records, Weihenmayer has refined his technique, starting with the approach. For the two-mile hike from the car to the base of East Buttress, he walked behind a teammate jingling a bear bell. "I learned on Aconcagua that unless someone is walking through snow, which I can consistently hear, they are really hard to follow," says Weihenmayer. "A bell works great, except for one time in Italy when we came across a herd of cows."

Matthew Shifrin is a blind rock climber from Boston who took up the sport almost a year ago, thanks to his friend Max Hernandez. Max acts as Matthew's caller - giving directions and guiding him to where holds are on the climbing route.

Rugby

There is blind rugby with its two formats suitable for blind and

partially sighted people, called VI Rugby and Blind Rugby. Both formats cater for people across the spectrum of sight loss, from B1 to B5, and are based off the 7s format.

Visually impaired (VI) rugby is modelled on traditional rugby and takes elements from both Union and League codes. Similar to touch rugby, the game is 7-a-side and the referee is very vocal, commenting on the game at all times to help all players understand where the ball is and what is happening.

Archery

'Blind' and 'Archery' are not two words that often appear in the same sentence. Mind you, we occasionally hear: "You're Blind – how can you do archery?". Yet they can. Archers

touch tactile sights with the back of their hand and receive feedback from a spotter on where their arrow fell.

Football - goalball

Goalball is arguably the most popular team sport for the blind and visually impaired. The sport originated in 1946 when Austrian Hanz Lorrenzen and German Sett Reindle developed the game as a way to keep blinded WWII veterans physically active.

Blind football is five-a-side football – and, more specifically, it is an adapted version of futsal. Blind football is also sometimes known as B1 football or football five-a-side. Outfield players must be registered as B1 (completely blind) although