



RIGHT: Jake Oakes: "My closest friends are within the England set-up"

BELOW-RIGHT: Taking a wicket during England's triumphant 2022 Ashes tour

OPPOSITE: Oakes hits a six during a Disability Premier League match at Derby last September

The England Deaf series against India, beginning on June 18, will be live-streamed on the ECB's website and YouTube channel

Breaking the sound barrier

In nearly every aspect of his life, England Deaf cricketer Jake Oakes has been underestimated. But on the cricket pitch it's an entirely different story, writes Evie Ashton

Jake Oakes, the 29-year-old England pace bowler, was born profoundly deaf and is one of the estimated 12 million people in the UK who have hearing loss, tinnitus or are deaf.

After being taken under the wing of Hull Cricket Club coach Joe Duffy at the age of seven, Oakes became hooked on the sport and four years later began attending England Deaf trial days run by a non-ECB volunteer organisation. Such inclusive environments were in sharp contrast to the negative attitudes and assumptions he was facing in school at the time.

"I realised I was different to my peers when we had a tennis ball throwing competition," he tells WCM. "People in the crowd were gathering the ball but when I went up everybody came in. They thought, 'Ah it's just a little poor kid who can't

throw' and I lobbed it over them, which I enjoyed a lot."

A decade later, in 2022, Oakes was part of the team which made history by winning the Deaf Ashes in Australia for the first time. Yet outside of cricket, little had changed.

"I get comments like, 'Oh, you don't look deaf' or 'You don't sound deaf'. In my head I'm like, 'What? I don't know what that means'. I know it's meant as a compliment, but I know it is not a compliment. Outside the game is where the biggest barriers are. I have left jobs because of inaccessibility, attitudes, and sometimes downright discrimination."

For Oakes, England Deaf has become much more than an international cricket set-up. It is a prejudice-free space, where deafness is respected and valued.

"I always play better in the deaf cricket environment," he says. "In a hearing environment, by the time you're in the middle you're





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knackered because you've gone through [all the barriers]. For example, making sure that the hotel staff know we are deaf so when we get there it's accessible rather than us gesturing our names. In England Deaf, by the time you get to the middle you're the best you can be.”

Whether playing or socialising, Oakes and his teammates can take joy and pride in deaf culture, while memories of being made to feel 'lesser' fade away.

“It is a really cool feeling to be pushed to the edge of your ability. Deaf or disabled people don't get that often because people assume 'safety' first. What frustrates me most is when people assume [being deaf] is a hard life, but they're missing out on a whole intricate story of Deaf culture. If I wasn't Deaf, I wouldn't have deaf cricket, a rich second language, and such good friends from the Deaf community. My closest friends are within the England set-up.

“People assume sign language is a direct translation of English, but it's so much more expressive. It's like a quarter your hands and 75 per cent your whole body,” says Oakes, who uses spoken English and British Sign Language.

The England squad will be reunited this month when they host India for the first time, with the seven-match series beginning at the County Ground in Derby on June 18.

The game itself is no different to non-disabled cricket except there is no verbal or audio communication. To represent England, players must have a hearing loss of at least 55 decibels in their better ear (equivalent to normal conversation) and must remove hearing devices during play.

“That changes the dynamic of the game,” says Oakes. “Suddenly you have to figure out how to communicate with one another. When running between wickets you can't shout or talk so you have to clock eyes or use hand gestures.

“When the ball is in the air you have to consider how to call for it, and not lose track of it. We appeal every time the ball goes near the bat which must be so annoying for umpires,” he laughs.

Such a wide range of communication styles means that accessible coaching is crucial – something which Oakes explains is often lacking at the recreational level.

“We don't learn through audio clues or through explanations, charts, or data. A lot of our team will rely on visual demonstrations and sometimes coaching isn't set up for that. The England Deaf team has numerous sign language users, including Pakistan Sign Language users who won't be able to access coaching without an interpreter there. It takes a lot of work to get the best out of people.”

Despite the ECB's disability pathway and thriving England disability teams, Oakes says there is much progress that still needs to be made, such as more media coverage and the introduction of professional contracts.

“We had the unfortunate cancellation of the T20 Deaf World Cup [in Qatar] in December [with the Deaf International Cricket Council citing “prevailing challenges and uncertainties in the region”], which shows how far we have to go.

“One of the biggest challenges is not many people know about deaf cricket. We often have people in the set-up who don't identify as Deaf or don't wear hearing aids. It is about making it clear that deaf and disability cricket is all inclusive. That can only happen through having more eyes on it.” ■