



Marian Constable tells us of her daughter Sophie – February 2007

Sophie Constable, talented, ambitious, slim, sociable, opinionated, passionate, sporty and very pretty was born 16 years ago with Down's Syndrome and 5 years ago developed insulin dependent diabetes. How does one change from the sweet, placid little baby born 5 weeks early into such a confident young woman? Sophie has had many influences in her life but the dominant and enduring one is football.

Speech development was an anticipated difficulty. Each sound needed much work. At 2-3 years of age we were still working on vowels. Sophie also needed to be able to change from one sound to another quickly to be able to produce clear speech. We had picture exercises to help but then hit upon the idea that to change from ooh to aah could be done with most fun by learning to sing "Ooh aah Cantona". At that stage Sophie was unable to make the sounds 'c', 'n', 't' or 's', but loved the song and quickly learnt the change of placement required.



Successive speech therapists have been bemused by Sophie's passion for football but very impressed with the way she can articulate perfectly the names of players like Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Ruud van Nistelrooy. As she has got older Sophie took great pride and pleasure in singing all of "Ooh, aah Cantona" and many other songs alongside her fellow supporters.

As any parent will know persistence wears you down. After a couple of seasons with Sophie harassing me to take her to see Manchester United play, I was able to get hold of some tickets to see Manchester United and go to matches, Christmas parties and Question and Answer evenings with the players, and much more besides.

At the parties the French players allow her to practise her French. The Question and Answer evenings give her the opportunity to speak in a public forum and ask questions that she has spent weeks thinking up and writing out. She has developed a bit of a reputation for the number of questions she goes with. Sophie always keeps one herself and gives one to a charity of her choosing. She takes a great pride in being able to give to others.

Sophie attends a mainstream school and her teachers have long since understood how important football is to Sophie. They, and her speech therapist, realise that if they engage Sophie in conversation about football she will be relaxed and inspired to work. Indeed she can perform significantly above her ability when discussing football.

In Year 9 the class were learning about the main cities in Great Britain. Sophie learnt many as we drove past them from Hertfordshire to Manchester, others just because they had Premiership teams, others again e.g. Cardiff because she'd been there to see United play.



In a test her teacher was quite happy for Sophie to write Birmingham City and Newcastle United instead of simply the place name. The teacher understood that football was Sophie's access to learning and that it proved she knew where the cities were.

Sophie also enjoys playing the game and a couple of years ago Sophie was awarded the lower school Physical Education prize. Sophie was judged to have the greatest love, passion, and commitment to sport and in particular football. Everybody wants to be as good as the next person and sometimes that can be more difficult than usual. For Sophie her love of football and the opportunities it brings her have given her something extra and made her a bit of a celebrity herself. When she was in year 7 an endless stream of older girls would stop her to ask, "Have you REALLY met David Beckham?" she was thrilled. Though, truth be known, she always preferred Gary Neville!

At the end of this school year Sophie is being entered for 5 GCSEs and 3 Entry Levels. I am anxious knowing that Sophie's confidence far surpasses her competence but even more than anxiety I am filled with pride knowing that making a success of your life is not about the cards you have been dealt but with the way you play them.

Sophie's involvement in football has given her the ability to meet and make friends on equal terms anywhere, the tool to help control her diabetes by getting lots of exercise and the ability to take up any challenge knowing that the harder you work the more you are likely to achieve and the greater fun you are likely to have on the way!

Marian Constable – a very proud mum