



Advantage Babs

Picking up tennis at age 60 and making the World Championships

Babs Weiberg, who was diagnosed with Type 1 in her 30s, is determined to not let her vision impairment hold her back, writes Deborah Condon

Having never picked up a tennis racquet in her life, Babs Weiberg decided to give the sport a go in May 2018. She is now one of the top players in the country, but with a difference – she plays blind tennis.

Babs has Type 1 diabetes and just 4% vision due to the eye conditions, diabetic retinopathy and macular degeneration. However, she is determined not to let diabetes or vision impairment hold her back.

Now aged 61 and living in Dundalk, Babs is originally from Germany. However, in the late 1990s, she met some people from Ireland, which sparked an interest.

“I started reading books about it and in 1998, I came over for the first time

and straight away, I was smitten. It hit me like lightning and I knew from that very first second that this was the country where I wanted to live. I moved over permanently in 2000,” she explains.

Babs had been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 1988 when she was around 30 years old. She knew nothing about the condition and was encouraged to see a doctor by a relative who noticed she was drinking up to 10 litres of water a day.

While she adores Ireland, she admits that she is glad she was originally diagnosed in Germany.

“In Germany, you have diabetes clinics where you are admitted if diagnosed. I stayed there for three weeks and then after I left, I got an appointment with a large hospital, where I was admitted for three weeks purely for educational purposes. There, I learned everything about diabetes, from injections to diet to shopping. Even today, I go by what I learned there,” she notes.

The German system has now moved more towards education classes, but there is always a constant link with the diabetes clinic.

“A lot of problems I see here when I am in the waiting room for my diabetes

clinic relates to people not really knowing what to do and how to do it. In Germany, if you have a problem, there is always a doctor available and not a six-month wait to see them. Every three months, you get a call from the equivalent of a German GP to get your HbA1c done. You are always being monitored and in contact with somebody,” she says.

She remembers her first diabetes appointment in Ireland, describing it as “an utter culture shock”.

“I could not believe the way diabetes is dealt with here, that you don’t have a doctor who you are constantly in contact with. You are always seeing someone new here, nobody knows your history so nobody can follow up. I am not blaming the doctors, it is the system from the top,” she says.

While Babs’ first appointment was in a Dublin hospital, she now attends a diabetes clinic in Dundalk.

“I attend whenever I get an appointment. I try to be seen every six months, but sometimes there are cancellations and you end up at the end of the queue. If I had a big problem right now, I would probably ring my German doctor. I still do it occasionally. A couple of years

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ago, I had a major problem, so I rang the German doctor. He called me back that same evening and the problem was resolved," she recalls.

Eye complication

In relation to her eyes, Babs says that by the time she realised there was something wrong, she had already lost 50% of her eyesight.

"In 2002, I started getting headaches often, which I don't normally suffer from and I could not see the TV right. I went to an optician and was straight away referred to an ophthalmologist. I was in shock and thought why is this happening to me?

"I saw a consultant in a Dublin hospital who had a very rude approach. He said 'if you are not careful, you could be blind in three weeks time'. Still to this day, I cannot understand how one can tell a patient that in this way. I was sitting on the bus coming home in tears wondering what I was supposed to do," she recalls.

Different treatments were tried over the years, but doctors could not stop the deterioration. She now has just 4% vision left. Her central vision is completely gone, so she can only see with the periphery, but this is blurred. She can make out figures but no detail.

"People sometimes say to me they wouldn't notice I have a problem with my sight, but I think that is because of my stubbornness and the fact that I want to maintain as much independence as possible. I also have a very good sense of direction which helps tremendously. Because it is a slow process, you develop skills to deal with the situation," she notes.

As a result, she can find her way around a place if she knows it well, such as her hometown of Dundalk. If she needs to go somewhere and is not familiar with the area, she usually asks someone to come with her.

"When that is not possible, I ask people on the way. I am very stubborn. Sometimes people say, 'let me help you', but I say no, if I need help, I will ask. I try first," she says.

However, she has had to give up many



Babs Weiberg, pictured with the special blind tennis ball which contains plastic beads so that it makes noise

Picture: Dundalk Democrat/Arthur Kinahan

things, including two things she loved – reading and driving.

In 2005, she began working with a transport company in Dundalk, using a special magnifying system on her computer. She loved the job but had to give it up in 2013 when it moved to Dublin, as there was no public transport to bring her to the new location.

A new passion

However, Babs has found a new passion – blind tennis. In April 2018, she got a call from someone in the blind centre that she attends asking if she would like to play as they were planning to start a group.

After her first session the following month, she was hooked and now trains at the Muirhevnamor Sports Centre in Dundalk three times a week.

In blind tennis, the ball is larger than a normal tennis ball and either black or yellow depending on the colour of the surface being played on. The core is filled with plastic beads so the ball makes a noise when it bounces. The racquet is also slightly shorter and in competitive tennis, the court may be slightly smaller depending on how visually impaired the person is.

The National Blind Tennis Championships were held in Ireland in January of this year and Babs was delighted to be voted player of the tournament. A week later, she got a call to say that she had "made it on to the team".

"I said 'what team' and I was told the national Irish team, which was going to

the World Championship in Spain. I was totally delighted," she recalls.

Seven players, including Babs, along with coaches and supporters, made the trip to Benidorm in Spain in June.

With blind tennis, there are different categories depending on the level of visual impairment – B1 to B4. B1 refers to people who are completely blind, while B4 refers to those with the least vision impairment. Babs was in the B2 category.

With B2, the playing court is the same width as a normal court, but slightly shorter in length. The player is allowed up to three bounces of the ball.

Around 120 players from around the world competed.

"It was an amazing atmosphere and because the group was relatively small, you had the chance to talk to everybody, including the coaches," she says.

Babs was ranked fourth in the world in her group after the tournament and number one in Ireland.

Babs admits that the funding side is difficult and she would love to find a sponsor so that she can train more and take part in more competitions.

"I definitely want to go to the World Championships again next year, however there will be better players next year and I am not one of the young ones. I am not sure how long my body will support me, but I will train as hard as I can for as long as I can," she says.

Babs' determination is clear and she urges anyone that has been diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes or a vision impairment to always try their best.

"We often say I would like to live in someone else's life, but that is silly because we do not know anything about their lives and what is really going on in their head. Everybody is born to walk in their own shoes, even if it sometimes seems to be easier for other people, it may not be.

"You can't sit and wait for something to happen, you have to go towards it. Sometimes it takes a long time to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it is there," she insists.