

How the Community Table Tennis Program positively impacted Udit's attitude towards sport and gender inclusivity

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Societal norms and traditional expectations surrounding gender often influence how sport activities are organized in schools, universities, and sport academies. Gender roles prevalent in our society associate certain sports with masculinity and femininity, reinforcing the idea that some sports are better suited for either men or women. This association starts at a young age, influencing young people's perspectives and discouraging interactions with individuals of other genders in sporting contexts.

The societal context in Bhubaneswar, Odisha is very similar as children have minimal interaction with people of other genders, both in schools and notably on the playground. It was in this scenario that Udit Narayan Sahoo, a class 9 student studying at Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandir in Bhubaneswar, Odisha was introduced to a mixed-gender approach to sport through the [Community Table Tennis](#) program led by [Pro Sport Development](#) in 2021.

Opening-up pathways for mixed-gender interactions

The CTT program offered a welcome change from the usual gender-segregated activities, creating a safe space for girls and boys to play together. With the help of this aspect of the program, Udit got the opportunity to interact with girls, something he had previously struggled with. However, after joining the CTT program, Udit shared that he got an opportunity to engage in extended conversations with girls through his participation in the program:



"We learned that girls and boys can play all games together. It feels good to be friends with them now."

In addition to the program sessions, participation in mixed-gender table tennis tournaments organized as part of the CTT program, further allowed Udit to challenge and overcome his personal gender bias. As a teenage boy, the general consensus amongst his male peers was that girls were not as good as boys in sports. Boys, including himself, did not like playing with girls and felt that playing with them would not be as challenging or interesting. Udit's seniors also disapproved of engaging in sport with girls as they

used to feel that sports are exclusive to men and boys.

However, the experience of participating in mixed-gender tournaments had a profound impact on Udit's perspective. Engaging with his female peers in a competitive environment and witnessing their remarkable skills as tough opponents, he realized that their talents and capabilities are at par with his own. These tournaments were thus able to dismantle his belief that sport is exclusively intended for boys and men.

Udit now not only feels at ease conversing and engaging in sport with girls but actively seeks to encourage and learn from them. This shift in mindset and behavior has not gone unnoticed, as even Udit's mother, Jayanta Kumar Sahoo, has observed a positive change in his attitude towards girls:

"When [Udit] first started playing table tennis, he used to come home and tell us that girls and boys play together in the program led by PSD. He did not want to play with girls. But after playing, his thoughts

towards girls have changed a lot. Now, he says that girls are playing better than boys. He talks very well with his sisters and other female friends and supports them in both studies and sports.”

While this aspect of the CTT program has resulted in a major shift in Udit’s attitude, he has also greatly benefited from the program’s novel approach towards sport.

Looking at sport through a fresh lens

Prior to joining the CTT program, Udit found that, like most of his peers, he had a half-hearted approach towards sport, often lacking the required motivation and encouragement to participate regularly. Further, the lack of structure and guidance made it difficult to play any sport, so while he may have had the opportunity to play, he did not know how to play.

Using a goal-oriented curriculum delivered by a well-trained team of facilitators, the CTT program was able to change Udit’s perspective towards sport, as he shares:

“There is a big difference between the games we play and those that PSD organizes. We used to play, but after PSD came, we started playing and exercising more regularly, which helped us get more interested in sports.”

Udit has found that there is a huge difference in how he understands sport and his relationship with it since joining the CTT program. The regular delivery of the program by experienced facilitators has made his interest in table tennis grow further. The facilitators in the program helped him get acquainted with the rules and become better at the sport. Pragatee Sethy, PSD’s Community Sports Trainer, shares her observations on how Udit’s fondness for the game grew over time:



Udit at a CSP session

“When Udit first took part in table tennis, he was very interested in playing the sport. His interest in table tennis increased with time as I saw him ask questions about techniques and rules of the game.”

With the help of the unique and engaging methodology utilized in the CTT program, Udit has come to love table tennis despite having never played the game before. The program has persuaded him and his peers to participate in sports and stay fit. Udit and his friends now look forward to playing table tennis every week.

The road ahead

Udit's journey exemplifies the extraordinary transformation that can occur through a unique, refreshing, and gender-inclusive approach to participation in sport. Having never played with girls before, Udit now embraces their company, not only on the field, but also in the classroom.

Udit’s mother acknowledges how this change in outlook has opened up new opportunities and avenues for his development:

“At first, since his school never had such a game [table tennis], we wondered if he could play or not because it was completely new to him. We have seen a lot of changes in him, he is more interested in sports and has also improved in his studies. He is learning many good things which will help him a lot in his future.”

Through his participation in the CTT program, Udit has experienced significant changes in his attitude,

which have made him more open to embracing and learning from new experiences. He is excited to carry this enthusiasm for learning into the future, as he recognizes the importance of a positive outlook to shape and enhance his life's journey.

The Community Table Tennis program is a collective effort between [Pro Sport Development \(PSD\)](#) and the [ITTF Foundation](#), to increase access to sport for young people and utilize table tennis as a tool to promote gender equality by supporting boys and girls from marginalized sections in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. The two year program, which took place from 2021-23, was supported by the ITTF Foundation.