

WOMEN'S
**SOFT
BALL
CRICKET**
FESTIVAL



Meet your Host **Asma**

Hi! I'm Asma, a Women's Soft Ball Cricket Festival Host. I live in Birmingham with my family. I teach GCSEs at secondary school and do as much volunteering as I can in my spare time - not that I have much of that...





How have you enjoyed the Women's Soft Ball Festivals?

They have been amazing. I was involved in all 5 of the Festivals in Birmingham this summer and we attracted far more women than we'd ever expected. We said we would run practice sessions once a fortnight but the women loved it so much, they started coming every week. These were mostly women who had never picked up a bat and ball until this year. They suddenly thought, Woweeeee! This is something I can do. I'm enjoying it. And the kids and dads can sit and watch mummy do something for once.

Which was your favourite Festival and why?

All of them. Honestly. Each had something special but the thing that stood out for me at all of them was the giggling. Even when someone did something wrong, it was giggles rather than embarrassment and I thought that was lovely. The women made so much progress – in their cricket but also in confidence – it was inspirational. It was great to see the mums playing while the dads ran the kids' part.



What could make the Festivals better?

A little more structure.

A bit of coaching for the first half hour, then on to the games. The women got so much out of the coaching. The games were good and certainly shouldn't be any longer, especially as many of the women have children.

Something in the winter please!

After the games, you could see the women were really eager but we had no more funding. We feel so deflated. We have planted a seed, we have excited these women. Now we need to think how women can continue to play beyond the Festivals.

Kids' activities.

When the kids were entertained, the mums relaxed more. They knew they could bring their kids and not worry about leaving them with a grumpy husband. Maybe we should have a creche leader or a kids' coach doing cricket or games.

Clubs need to get more into it.

They should start running the Festivals instead of just letting us use them as a venue. A lot of women don't want to transition to hard ball. They like soft ball as a separate game in itself - and they have a whole lot of family who might just come along with them.

An End of Season Grand Match.

The Festivals were not intended to be competitive but, surprisingly, everyone wanted to know their scores and who had won.

Food and drink turned out to be an important part of the day. This would be a good way for Clubs to make some money, by providing food instead of me dashing to the supermarket for sandwiches and cake.

What's in it for the Clubs?

It's the perfect opportunity for them. The Festivals spark the interest. The Clubs are then in the ideal place to build the experience. You have all these women coming in, many of whom have children, brothers, husbands, family. If a Club is clever enough, they will set up a women's section, which a lot of clubs just don't have. It would be a breath of fresh air. These mums would take their younger children to All Stars, while the older ones could be introduced into the Club. It becomes a whole family thing and could bring so many more people into every Club.

They will need to make sure their facilities are up to scratch and put some thought into things like changing areas, decent loos, kids' zones, food, parking. I think that's a small price for something that could breathe new life into so many Clubs.

How did you encourage women to come along?

You have to make it fun. I really want women to play cricket and not think of it as just a men's game. And I certainly don't want it to be too elite. Apart from just the cricket, I always try to add something new at each event. We had tug-of-war, the chicken dance, some groups had film showings, flashmobs to get women interested, even the odd glass of Prosecco. Yes, it's about cricket but above all, it's about having fun.

There are always 2 Hosts for each event and I worked very closely with Hannah. We are a very strong team. I'm old school so I went round with leaflets, trying to get them into women's groups and places they might go. Hannah did a fantastic job on social media so word spread throughout families and friends and we ended up with more women than we could possibly have hoped for, and a lot of younger women as well. Looking forward, we need to keep thinking of new and fun things to do to keep each event fresh.



How did you get into cricket?

As a child, I was surrounded by cricket. My dad watched it on TV, my 3 brothers played at school but back then, Asian girls weren't allowed to play sports. All I could do was race myself to the shops and back to beat my previous best time, although I did play cricket outside with my brothers. Ironically, I was the one who taught them how to catch a ball!

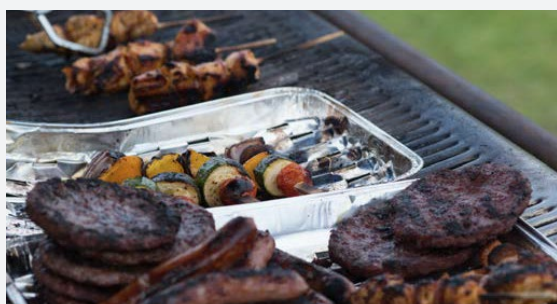
Then, 6 years ago, I bumped into Kabir Ali, the ex-England bowler. He had been at school with my brother so I went over to talk to him. Turns out he was coaching the girls at Moseley school but couldn't be with them un-chaperoned. I told him how interested I was in coaching girls - and it all went from there. It was a long time since I'd picked up a bat and I was useless to begin with. At Kabir's suggestion, I did a CSW coaching qualification and realised just how much I loved it so I started playing as well as coaching. I now have the level 2 cricket coach qualification and I am a part time personal trainer which helps with cricket activities.

I joined Kings Heath Club because I knew they were really welcoming, and they have a successful women's section from age 7 all the way up. I thought, these people won't judge me - an Asian woman with a hijab. And I was right. Now I'm a volunteer coach there. Also for the past 3 years, I have been working with Supreme Cricket Academy on Sundays, coaching young children. It was set up by Mushtaq Mohammed, former Pakistan Captain who is the head coach. It's all about working with the community to get young Asians into cricket and I try to encourage girls to get involved. We don't want culture and religion to be a barrier for them, especially if they enjoy cricket, so we're running indoor sessions too.

Were there any cultural issues?

The younger Muslim women are very liberal in their thoughts. The older women often had more fears. I was happy that some of them played in their headscarves. We did find that many women couldn't be out for too long and had to be home at a certain time. We also had to make sure that any men watching were far enough away. Next time I think we would move the boundary even further so that the women can't be seen. Things are slowly changing for Muslim women but there are still restrictions.





What makes a good Host?

You need to have a passion for Women's Soft Ball Cricket. You need to be well organised, a good communicator and a people person - you may have to build relationships with some very shy women, as well as the Clubs you are working with.

What does a Host do?

They manage the Festival from beginning to end. The Host is the person you would come to with a problem. In fact, with 2 Hosts at each event, there are 2 people to ask or to bounce ideas off. It sounds like hard work but I loved every minute of it, even though you end up doing a bit of everything.

As well as meeting with the venue to make sure everyone knows what's happening, it's our responsibility to make sure everything - including the kit - is ready for the women to turn up and enjoy themselves. We have to make sure everything looks professional. I have to say, all the information, the posters and the leaflets from ECB really helped with that. I also think that a bit of coaching before we start playing helps enormously. This is another area where the Clubs could get involved. These women are so keen and once they've had a go, they suddenly become a lot more competitive, which was a big surprise to us.





In the year that the
England Women's Cricket
team won the World Cup,
we achieved so much more
with the Festivals than we
ever thought we would.



It has been fantastic and I'm looking forward to
doing it all again next year.

