

Joanne is leading the charge for mixed-ability rugby

September 2023

Worcester woman Joanne Gatford is looking forward to a 'once-in-a-lifetime' opportunity to play for a MARIs (Mixed Ability Rugby Invitationals) ladies' rugby team.



The MARIs are an invitational rugby side selecting players from the mixed-ability rugby community all over the world. Joanne, who has a learning disability and lives at Sanctuary Supported Living's [Hazel Court](#), will be joining the MARIs for their match in Spain later this month. Joanne moved into Hazel Court, which offers accommodation with personalised care and support for adults with learning disabilities, in 2015.

Since then, the Hazel Court team have provided her with regular support to build her confidence and develop her life skills, such as preparing and cooking meals, and assisting her with her activities, alongside her very supportive family. This also includes her regular participation in mixed-ability rugby training with [Worcester Rugby Club](#). Joanne is passionate about rugby and used to attend all the Worcester Warriors home games with her father and grandfather.

The MARIs invite players from around the world to play in exhibition fixtures against a host country. Launched in 2021 with a men's side, this will be the first year that a ladies' side will play, and Joanne's MARIs teammates will also include players from Ireland, Italy, Spain and Belgium. To be chosen to play for the MARIs, players are first nominated by their clubs, and are then chosen by the MARIs committee, who select individuals that they identify as going above and beyond for mixed ability rugby, and who embody the ethos of being an inclusive rugby player. To ensure the MARIs squads are different every time, players may only take part once, meaning that this is quite literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Joanne.

Continued...

NEWS story

Sanctuary
Supported
Living

The fixture Joanne has been selected for will be held in Pamplona, Spain on Saturday 30 September. Her family are looking forward to cheering her on from the sidelines, while the residents and staff at Hazel Court will be getting together at home to watch and celebrate virtually. To make sure that everyone has the same opportunity to participate, the costs are the same for each MARIs tour, which means that sponsorship is needed to provide additional support.

As part of supporting Joanne's sporting achievements, and encouraging her to develop her confidence and skills, Sanctuary Supported Living will be Joanne's sponsor for the upcoming MARIs match. Joanne said: "I'm so excited to have been selected and play rugby with an incredible team of people and to also go to Spain. It's a dream come true." Chris Upton, Deputy Local Service Manager at Hazel Court, added: "All of us at Hazel Court, both the staff team and tenants, are so proud of Joanne and it's an incredible achievement that she's been selected.

Since moving to Hazel Court her confidence has grown enormously and this opportunity is a testament to her hard work and attitude on and off the pitch. We're all absolutely thrilled for her and we're looking forward to watching the game together and cheering her on." Jamie Evans founder of the MARIs and Club Chairman said: "Mixed Ability Rugby is a fantastic way for people to play sport, be included, respected and be part of a team. The MARIs gives players something to strive towards, to be selected to play in historic games within the rugby world."