



## **Hidden disability: You can't tell who's disabled just by looking...and it really shouldn't matter**

Katrina is a huge football fan, with a soft spot for a certain good looking England player! She's also a teenager with a learning difficulty. Katrina says, "Football is really exciting. I've been to some matches, and I'd like to go to more. I watch it on telly all the time." At first, Katrina found entering a stadium "A bit scary," because of the noise and the crowds. But once the game started, she relaxed, and now she gets, "Less worried than I used to."

Katrina's dad Steve says, "When people first see Katrina, they'll have no idea that she's disabled. Because she looks like most teenage girls, people expect her to talk and behave like the other girls they know of a similar age." But is this a good thing or a bad thing? Steve says, "There are two sides to it. In one way it's an advantage, because it means she avoids the negativity that some people with visually apparent conditions, such as Down's syndrome, experience sometimes. We've heard people being verbally abused by other fans on occasion, and it's extremely upsetting. It's offensive to the majority of non-disabled fans who have to hear it as well. Katrina doesn't tend to be patronised right off the bat either – people talk to her directly, instead of asking us, her parents, what she wants."

So what's the other side of the coin? "It can also be a disadvantage, because some supporters think Katrina shouldn't be in the so-called "disabled section" - they don't understand that she needs the security of the protected, calmer environment, which also enables us to get her out quickly if she should become emotionally overwhelmed.



Because they don't realise she has difficulties in many situations, some people think she's behaving childishly, and that she should "know better." I've had people make comments to me about how I shouldn't let her behave like that at her age. I'd love for more people to understand that you can't visually pick all disabled people out of a crowd – not in the stadium, in the street, or anywhere else. And it shouldn't matter anyway. We're all fans. We're all there to enjoy the football. We can do that together."