

## Interview with Caz Walton

20/6/12

PD: Paul Dickinson

CW: Caz Walton

[26:52] PD: Caz, you enjoyed a very long and successful Paralympic career, but what are your memories of your first ever Paralympic Games?

CW: My first ever Paralympic Games was Tokyo, which was an awful long time ago, and I wasn't actually supposed to go. I was selected with three weeks to go when somebody else went sick so my memories and my impressions are a bit of a blur. But the last three weeks, just training to get up to speed and preparing for the Games, just seemed to go in about 24 hours. But the Games themselves were amazing. I've never been to a Games in the Far East that haven't been good, and Tokyo did us proud, a superb Games.

[27:40] PD: Well you won a couple of gold medals there, tell us about the experience of going out competing but also coming out in top spot, that must have been amazing?

CW: I think when I was younger, I was a very confident athlete and, to be honest, it didn't really occur to me that I wouldn't come back having won something, which is the sheer arrogance of youth I think. And I was lucky enough to come back with two gold medals, including the first ever track event. Just being in the right place at the right time and lucky enough to get switched into the team. It was, for a youngster, a superb experience.

[28:24] PD: Well athletes these days seem to concentrate, obviously, on one sport but by the time you came to the Paralympic Games in 1968, you were competing in more than one sport. How did that come about?

CW: In the very early days of Paralympic sport, because there was so little finance and so little publicity, one almost attached to the other I guess, we had to do a number of different sports. If you didn't do more than one sport, you just weren't selected because there wasn't the money there to take people to specialise in one particular event. Even when I went to Tokyo, I swam and I also did field events because I had to. And the same in... That went right through, in fact, almost till 1988. I think 1988 was the last Games where people multi-sport evented.

[29:22] PD: You still got gold and silver medals in 1968 but it could have been an extra gold medal as well. Tell us a little bit about that?

CW: I found, only a couple of years ago, that ... I picked up three gold medals in Tel Aviv in 1968, that it could have and should have been four, because one of my events was Pentathlon and apparently the officials didn't count all five events so they didn't count my swimming event and apparently if they had, I would have come back with another gold medal, but as I didn't even know about it until two years ago, it was a bit late to complain.

[30:10] Repeat of first question PD: Caz, you've had a very long and distinguished career, what are your memories first of all about that very first Paralympics that you went to back in 1964?

CW: My first Games was Tokyo 1964, which was one that I wasn't even selected for, because I replaced somebody who went sick just three weeks beforehand so it's a complete blur to me until I actually got off the plane at the other end, because, in three weeks, I think I went through three weeks in about 24 hours, just trying to top up the training because I'd tapered off, not being selected and getting everything ready, and it was just so exciting. I was 17 at the time, and very inexperienced and just to go abroad was exciting but the thrill of competing as well was enormous.

[31:05] Repeat of question about medal in 1968 PD: You won more medals in 1968, your second Paralympic experience, but it could have been one extra medal, tell us a bit about that and the sort of mystery surrounding where this medal disappeared to?

CW: I went to Tel Aviv in 1968, where I did pick up three gold medals and one or two extraneous bits and pieces as well, but about two years ago I found out that I should have won four gold medals because one of my events was the Pentathlon and apparently the officials didn't add up all the disciplines so they dropped swimming from my points and had I had those added in, I would have won a gold medal instead of a bronze medal. But, I've forgotten how many years, but too many years later, it was a bit late to complain.

[32:06] PD: Being somebody who competed in more than one Paralympic sport, how did you manage to fit all of this in, in terms of training and preparation for a major international championship?

CW: I've had it said to me, on more than one occasion, that we just went away and enjoyed ourselves at games, and that the standards were much lower then – and the latter part of that is quite true, the standards were lower. There were fewer competitors. But we had to train, I had a full time job, I trained after work and weekends. There was no finance so everything had to come out of mine, or my parents', pockets. And the facilities weren't that easy to find to train either. I can remember changing at Crystal Palace in the ladies' toilet because I couldn't get into the changing rooms, it wasn't accessible and then driving, in my gear, around the track to get to the lower level to go and do track training. So, we did it because we loved it. I envy the athletes today because I would have loved to have been a full time athlete, but I did enjoy every minute of it.

[33:26] PD: Do you think lottery funding has made a massive difference to the standard of Paralympic sport in this country?

CW: Lottery funding has made a huge difference to the standard of sport in our country. You can see the times, the distances, the performances going up from games to games, and I'm lucky to still be involved in Games because I work for the British Paralympic Association so I get to measure all these things and go to events. But lottery funding has been a real, real step-change for our athletes.

[34:02] PD: There's a very strong argument I think for saying the best all-round Olympic or Paralympic athlete is not Denise Lewis, is not Jessica Ennis, it's actually Caz Walton. How does that make you feel, that you're not as well recognised as some of your able-bodied counterparts?

CW: I think in terms of publicity, the Paralympics are beginning to come out of their chrysalis, and I think these games will give our athletes the sort of profile that they deserve. I can remember having a little bit of publicity from time to time, but I'm a bit of a shrinking violet so I'm not sure that I would have coped too well with interviews and being in the public spotlight so I have no compunction about having avoided that. But I think the athletes of today are superb athletes and they deserve recognition and I'm glad to see that that is finally beginning to happen and there are some household names amongst Paralympic athletes.

[35:14] PD: Back in 1964, when you started your international career, you've seen Paralympic athletes develop, you've seen the Paralympic Games expand hugely, what difference do you think it has made to the exposure of Paralympic sport generally and disability in sport?

CW: I think that disabled people nowadays, certainly in this country, not worldwide, are able to lead a much, much more normal life – and quite rightly so. I think sport and the publicity it's getting have a part in that. And I think that the public are now starting just to look at athletes that have a disability and realise that they're athletes. They look at the screen perhaps, and forget about the disability and look at the performance, which is wonderful and it is how it should be. But my ambition, and I think the ambition of the Paralympic Games in itself... When Guttman started the Games, his whole ethos was social integration and it's worked. It's grown bigger and bigger, and stronger and stronger and that message is spreading, and for instance in China, a dozen years ago you just didn't see a disabled person. Now, we're aware that they have as many disabled people in China as we have in this country and they're producing some superb athletes.

[36: 50] PD: Do you think Sir Ludwig Guttman and Stoke Mandeville in general would have been excited about the explosion in Paralympic sport since the 1950s/60s?

CW: Poppa Guttman would have loved to have been here now. Hopefully he's looking down and seeing the success of his games because I think he would have been so excited to see the way it's gone. And especially this year with it coming back to Great Britain, which from a Paralympic point of view is where it started. I think that he would be very proud and very excited.

[37:26] PD: You've lived Paralympic sport for many, many years now, what's your biggest memory about Paralympic sport generally?

CW: I think... do you know I have a thousand memories, or more possibly, over the years and there have been so many good ones. Almost the proudest moment I've had... it's one of those moments where you always remember where you were when you heard the news, and it was when I heard the news that we'd got the games. Absolutely amazing. And I was on my own, well that was a bummer because I wanted to talk to someone about it, and sort of shriek from the rooftops, but that's one of the best moments I've had I think.

[38:15] PD: Did you shed a little tear when it was announced that Great Britain had the games?

CW: Oh I'm terrible, I'm so sentimental. Yes, I'm getting emotional just talking about it. Yes, there were tears everywhere. I think the lounge was flooded.

[38:34] PD: What do you think we've got to look forward to as a nation due to the fact that the Paralympic Games are being held in London?

CW: I'm looking forward to a really successful summer. I think that both the Olympics and the Paralympics will be a success for Great Britain. Who'd want to be anywhere else this year? I'm so pleased to still be involved and to be getting to see the top athletes in the world. It's going to be a marvellous summer.

[39:10] PD: Do you think it will be marvellous for the British team as well?

CW: I think the British team will do very well this year. I've seen the amount of work that the athletes are putting in and I've seen the preparation. I don't think that I've ever seen a better prepared British team. If we're not... I'd be amazed if we weren't successful this year.

[39:32] PD: The British team, in a way, have made a rod for their own back because, ever since I've been involved, the British team's performance at Paralympic Games have got better and better and better and better. Can they go one step better this time and win more medals than they've ever done before?

CW: It's getting harder to win medals at a games, which is quite right. I think there's something like 165 countries coming to the Paralympic Games this year and the standards will be higher. It will be more difficult to win medals. We've never in Paralympic history finished out of the top five in the medal table and we've finished second for the last three games. Now, I would love to say that we'll be top of the medal table this year. I don't think that will happen but our aspiration is to be second and I think we are more than capable of achieving that.

[40:30] PD: Is there any one athlete that used to inspire you? Everybody who's ever been successful in sport, I think, has had a role model. Did you have a role model that inspired you when you were younger?

CW: When I first started in Paralympic sport, there was an amazing athlete called Dick Thompson, going back a-ways, because he goes back further than I do, which is quite a long time. But, he was just a natural athlete. He looked the sort of a-typical athlete, a Greek god. But he was such a good field eventer, he threw the javelin with amazing technique, he put the shot, he was good at discus. He was good at all three of those events. On top of which, he was a nice guy. I aspired to be like him.

[41:25] PD: And do you think you did become like him?

CW: I wish I'd had his talent. I did pretty well, and I enjoyed it. I loved competing and I miss competition but I hate losing so I don't compete anymore.

[41:46] PD: Do you think the success of the Paralympic Games has made society generally more tolerant, and has given them a better understanding of disabled people?

CW: I think disability sport in general, and Paralympics in particular, because it's such a focal point have made an immense impression on the general public, and that's not just in this country. I know that's happened in the larger and better resourced countries like Australia and America, but it's beginning to happen all over the world – in the Far East, in South America, in Africa. They don't have the resources we do but the public perception is beginning to change about disability. And for me, that's almost the best thing the Paralympics could do.

[42:43] PD: What are the lessons, do you think there are to be learned about disability generally in society from sport?

CW: I think society can see, in sport, especially at an elite level, that somebody with a disability is just a person who happens to have a bit missing, a bit that doesn't work, but they're still a person. And there's no difference between me and the average 'Joe' in the street in terms of what I want to do, the social life I have, the family I have and I think that the publicity from the Paralympic Games, and elite sport in general, has made a tremendous difference to the way that people look at you. People don't stare at me in the street, anymore, not even because of my good looks but that's because it's just another person going down the street and a good deal of that is down to the sort of exposure that sport has given us I think.

[43:58] PD: If you could write a history book about the importance of Stoke Mandeville and particularly Sir Ludwig Guttmann, in terms of what they have achieved and what they have done for disabled people, how could you sort of summarise it in one sentence? What would you say about Stoke Mandeville in particular?

CW: I wish I had the memory and the ability to write a book about Paralympic history, because I've only missed one Games so, I'm sort of history in motion to a certain extent. But to sum it all up I think that Sir Ludwig, wherever he had been, it was our good fortune that he was in this country and at Stoke Mandeville, just changed the world for us. It was a complete step-change. He came in, had a vision – you can't put that in one sentence I don't think but it's just, as far as disability and disabled sport was concerned, he did change the world.

[45:14] PD: He certainly changed your world, didn't he?

CW: He changed my world out of all recognition because he gave me so much more confidence. I knew that I was an equal to anybody. And I wasn't just a second class citizen and I went on to have a normal working life, a normal home. Yeah, I don't know where I would have been without him.

[45:47] PD: You said earlier that he actually changed the world of Paralympic sport but in actual fact, he changed the world – is that something you'd agree with?

CW: Sir Ludwig invented Paralympic sport. There was nothing of that ilk around before he came along. I mean it was his vision to hold a small competition in 1948, on the same day as the Olympic Games opened in London. So he saw a long, long time back where things were going, or where he wanted them to go. And he made it happen. I can't think of a single human being who would have actually done that, and persevered and gone through. He died at 80, I wish he'd lived to 100.

[46:44] PD: Do you think it's important that people remember him?

CW: I hope he's never forgotten. He deserves to be remembered always. He was an amazing man. He made a tremendous difference, both in the medical profession and almost invented disability sport. I hope, especially this year, that he is shown the honour and admiration that he deserves and that he is remembered in the annals of Paralympic sport forever.

[47:51] Repeated question PD: Do you think Sir Ludwig will be remembered forever?

CW: I think Sir Ludwig deserves to be remembered for all time. I think this year is a showcase to the work that he put in and the invention of the games – he invented the Paralympic Games, he had that vision and push and determination to get us where we are today. I hope that he is honoured and remembered, not just this year but in Paralympic annals forever.

[48:56] Repeated question PD: How do you think Sir Ludwig should be remembered?

CW: I think Sir Ludwig should be remembered in a number of ways. He changed, forever, disability sport. He invented Paralympic Games. He also made a massive contribution to the medical profession and spinal cord injured. But Paralympic Games are the focal point of everything that he ever wanted. He was an amazing man – I hope that he's not just remembered with some or this year, but in Paralympic annals forever.

[49:36] PD: It would be unfair of me to ask you which was your favourite sport, being sort of master of so many different sports and winning medals in so many different sports, but is there one sport, or one moment in your Paralympic career when you thought – that was absolutely brilliant and it gave you a bit of a tingle, even when you think about it now?

CW: I've done an awful lot of different Paralympic sports. I think my most successful sport was definitely in athletics because I was a sprinter. I picked up most of my medals there and I loved sprinting. But I think the moment I'll remember most was - I switched to fencing as I got older and slower, slower on the track anyway, and fencing is such a good combination... It's a physical game of chess, it's the perfect combination of physical and mental prowess. And I'd had a lean couple of games, for one reason or another, and went to 1988 Seoul, which in itself was an amazing Games - really good - and won a medal there. And, I beat the favourite in the last bout and the crowd was really, really quiet and there was just this one British voice barracking in the background, and after the last hit – I think that's got to be the best medal in terms of here that I ever won.

[51:24] PD: Because you're somebody that's had so much experience, not just of Paralympic sport, but of sport in general, and of life – what would you say to a young person just starting out in their Paralympic career?

CW: Do you know, one of my aspirations is, I was the last fencer to win a gold medal for Britain. I sort of figure that I can't give up until there's another one and we've got some youngsters coming into the sport now thankfully – we've got a 14 year old going to the Games this year. And I say to them – you need to work hard, there's nothing comes easily – literally, no pain no gain. But enjoy it because if you're not enjoying your sport, you won't do well. Get in there, enjoy yourself, work hard, and the experience will make it all worthwhile whether you win or not but I want you to win.

[52:32] PD: Sir Ludwig, Stoke Mandeville, sport – all those three things combined, plus other things, have made a remarkable difference to your life haven't they?

CW: I think if I gave up sport altogether I'd have to stop breathing. I love it. I love watching it. I still do compete occasionally, but only when I think I can win, but it's just made me a different person. I don't know what I'd have been doing or where I would have been without it but I've had an amazing life and I've loved every minute.

[53:14] PD: As a teenage girl growing up, when did sport first appear on your horizon as something you thought you'd be interested in getting involved with?

CW: I almost got into sport by accident actually. I'd had a couple of years in and out of hospital with various operations, and I was going up to Great Ormond Street for rehab. One of the physios said to me "there's this thing going on at Stoke Mandeville, why don't you go and have a look", you know. I did like sport and I'd started to do a little bit of swimming as rehab and I thought "well, okay" and my parents took me up there and that was it, hooked.

[54:06] PD: When did rehab all of a sudden become competition, or a competitive opportunity?

CW: The switch from rehab to competition was seamless I think. I was always competitive anyway and I think, I'd done a bit of swimming and I went to Stoke Mandeville and I saw these other people swimming and doing other sports and I thought "I think I could do that, and I think I could possibly do it better" – again, the arrogance of youth. So, I started training. I was really lucky because I got into Beckenham Ladies' Swimming Club, which was a very successful able-bodied club in those days and they gave me a coach and I went training every minute I could. So that was my first sport, and from there I just moved on to... had to move on to other sports but...

[55:00] PD: And when did you first realise that there was actually some talent in there – that you could be a gold medallist, or you could be an international performer?

CW: I always wanted to win. It was just something in me. I wanted to be the best, and I was lucky because I did seem to have the sort of talent to help me achieve that and within two months of starting sport, I think I'd broken a couple of national swimming records and the following year, I held three world records in different strokes and it just went on from there really.

[55:45] PD: The birthplace of Paralympic sport, of course Stoke Mandeville, that's changed a lot over the years hasn't it? What was your first impression of Stoke Mandeville Hospital?

CW: The first time I went to Stoke Mandeville was possibly a little under-whelming. I turned up at the hospital and we were expected to stay in the wards. I dread to think what Health and Safety would say about it today because, I mean, you were so close to the person in the next bed that you could almost pick their leg up and move it by mistake for your own. But, yes, we were either accommodated in the wards themselves, which was the better of the two options, or in sort of nissen huts which had been built by the RAF in 1950-something, which were cold in winter and hot in summer but it wasn't the way it looked, it was the way it felt. It was just an amazing environment, there was so much of a buzz in those... well I think there still is... but certainly in those days, that's what caught me, there was a camaraderie. The hospital staff and Poppa Guttmann were amazing, and there was the sport as well.

[57:13] PD: The sports facilities there were a little bit basic weren't they?

CW: Sports facilities were a little basic. We got transported up to RAF Halton to swim – they didn't have a swimming pool on site. We did have a basketball court. When I first went there, there was no athletics track. We only did 60m in those days so we only really needed a 100m strip but that was a long time before it went in. And field events was just, sort of, a painted line on the grass and get on with it. But there was nowhere else like it.

[57:52] PD: What do you think about the expansion of the sporting programme in the Paralympics now?

CW: I'm really enthusiastic about the new sports that are coming into the Paralympic programme. We've got canoeing and triathlon coming in for Rio. We've got some new disciplines within sports coming in this time around as well. I want to see the whole thing expand. I want to let more people have the experience, more athletes to have the opportunity. There's no difference between that and the Olympics, nothing at all - the same premise applies. Let's get some more brilliant athletes in and let's get some more sports that are good to look at.

[58:41] PD: Being such a great all-rounder, you've probably just about tried every sport going, but is there one sport you haven't tried that you wished you had?

CW: I wish tennis had been around when I first started. I play recreationally now and I'm not much good, but I love it and I would have really liked to have had a go at that. They have such an amazing programme too with competitions virtually every week all over the world. What more could you ask really?

[59:15] Repeated question PD: How do you feel about the expansion of the whole Paralympic sports programme?

CW: I think it's great to see new sports coming in to the Paralympic movement. We've got triathlon, and we've got canoeing, coming in for Rio and it's a real opportunity for the public to see different sports, different athletes, different abilities. I think it's great.

[59:37] Repeated question PD: And what about your own participation in sport, is there any one sport that you'd really have loved to have really got stuck into?

CW: I wish that tennis had been around when I was competing and when I was younger. I would have loved to have had a go at tennis. I do play recreationally, but I'd have loved to have been playing at tournaments all over the world – different country every week- great!