

Transcript of interview with Chris Holmes

20/6/12

PD: Paul Dickinson

CH: Chris Holmes

PD: Chris, tell us how you first got started in sport?

CH: I got started in sport, like so many people, through the family. I was lucky enough to have parents who were really interested in sport. My mum taught me to swim when I was two, I joined the local swimming club when I was five, and it developed from there.

PD: And when were you first made aware of Paralympic sport, Paralympic swimming in particular?

CH: I came across that slightly later, when I was fifteen. I became aware of the opportunities, which was because when I grew up, I could see fully till I was fourteen and then I lost my sight overnight, and I had always had a big involvement in sport and then a little bit after that, I discovered that Paralympic sport existed, got involved with the team and was lucky enough, fifteen months after that, to qualify for the junior European championships.

PD: And how did you get on in that first international competition?

CH: It was a fantastic first competition to go to, European championships in Moscow, so a great trip. Felt confident, felt good, 100 freestyle was my race. I swam, touched, and finished 28th.

PD: Goodness me.

CH: So, it was a brilliant introduction to international sport. But I came back from there really knowing what I had to do if I was going to be able to get onto the big stage and really just see how far I could take swimming, see if I could make a final, maybe maybe make a podium finish.

[01:40]PD: And your first Paralympic Games was 1988, seems a long time ago now. What are your memories of that first Paralympic experience?

CH: My first Paralympic experience in Seoul, South Korea, in 1988 was just sensational. I went there, I was 16 years old. I got my first suit, I thought that was pretty cool. We were all in the GB gear, and going to somewhere so different to Great Britain, it was phenomenal. To be in that village with so many other different nations. To dine with the world in that dining hall in the centre of the village, it was absolutely phenomenal. The facilities were awesome, they put on such a great games. I was lucky enough to come away with two silvers and a bronze medal. At that stage, I didn't think any Paralympic Games could top what was put on in Seoul.

[02:33]PD: But your first gold medal was still, if you like, something that you could look forward to in the future, and it took four years to reach that stage. How did your life change once you got that first gold medal?

CH: When I won my first gold medal, it was an absolutely extraordinary experience. I'd trained hard for Barcelona. I'd been training with the Olympic swimmers at the City of Birmingham, under coach Barry Prime. We'd done brilliant training, we were in great shape. I felt confident but you never know what's going to happen in the race. First race, 200m individual medley. It's a hard race. Four lengths of the Olympic pool, one of each of the strokes, it's a sprint and it hurts. Two points I absolutely remember: touching those Omega time pads and knowing that I'd won was just such a brilliant feeling. But even more significantly, about half an hour later, standing on that rostrum, having the gold medal put around your neck, knowing that the Union Jack is flying, and having 10,000 people stand to sing the Great British national anthem – just such an honour to have had that experience.

[03:45]PD: And that was the first of quite a few gold medals in Barcelona, wasn't it?

CH: Barcelona went so well for me, it was a fabulous Paralympic Games. In many ways, it was the first Paralympic Games where the organising committee really made it the Games for the city. So local Barcelonians, or whatever the word for them is, Barcelonias, all queued round the block to get into the pool, to get into the stadium, to get into the basketball. They really made it the city's Games, and after five days I was incredibly fortunate to have done five races, won five gold medals, three European records, two world records. Then there was two days break before the final race, that 100 freestyle, the "blue riband" race in the water. The British press suddenly realised that no Briton had ever won six gold medals at a single Games before, so they started writing that story: would I do it, wouldn't I do it? All I knew was I had to focus 100% on the 100 freestyle – that was the one thing that I could still control, and it was an awesome race. I was racing against the local Spanish hero, Pablo Corral – big support for him, tiny support from British fans for me. And it was a great, great race. Open-air pool in Barcelona, Spanish sunshine in the evening, it was the final session of the Games – just really went so, so well. I remember touching, knowing that I'd won and just feeling such a fabulous rush of energy inside. And again, that sense of standing on the gold medal rostrum, knowing that I'd been so fortunate to have that opportunity to win six gold medals at a single Games. It was such an emotional moment, such a great honour to have not just done something as an individual, not just done something for the team, but crucially to have been fortunate enough to do something for my country.

[05:52] PD: Four years after that, the Paralympic Games went to the United States and to Atlanta. Was that a different experience altogether?

CH: Atlanta Paralympic Games was a really interesting experience. In many ways, the Games had moved on. There was more commercial involvement. The facilities were fantastic, they were even larger so this time the pool held 15,000 spectators so it was on an even larger scale. I think it was a very different Games to Barcelona, so many elements of it were really good but it wasn't an easy place to compete. There were many elements which could have been done better, with more time, with more focus, with more resource. But the bottom line was each and every athlete was in the same position so regardless of some of the difficulties, you were still there to do the job and the key

was to still focus on your races and ensure that all that four years of training could be put into that few seconds of performance.

[07:00] PD: Out of all the Paralympic gold medals that you won, nine in total, which do you think is the moment that you will cherish?

CH: The gold medal that will stay with me, so memorably, for the rest of my life... all nine were fantastic, all nine were different in their own way, but that sixth gold medal in Barcelona, the 100 freestyle, the last race of the Games, knowing that no Briton had ever won six gold medals before at a single Games... so far, no Briton has done it since, touch wood. It was a really special moment, and it just meant so much, not just for me but for all the people who'd helped me to get to that point – friends, family, coaches, physios, dieticians, strength conditioning, everybody who'd been involved, each and every one of those people had a little piece of that gold medal because without that fabulous team of support you wouldn't even get to the start blocks, never mind be able to do a gold medal performance.

[08:12] PD: The Paralympic Games has had a huge influence on your life one way and another hasn't it?

CH: The Paralympic Games is such an incredible thing to be involved with. I was lucky enough to have seventeen years on the Great Britain swimming team. When I finished competing, I was asked to get involved with the bid for London 2012. That was extraordinary to be part of that, and standing in Trafalgar Square on July the 6th 2005 when we heard that London had been awarded the Olympic and Paralympic Games – that was a sensational moment. Knowing the power of the Paralympic Games to transform, to change, to inspire. Knowing it was coming home to Britain for the first time in 64 years – great, great moment. Then lucky enough to be asked to be Director of Paralympic Integration for London 2012 – to lead London's Paralympic Games planning and delivery – very, very fortunate. And it's been an amazing ride.

[09:14] PD: have you noticed a difference over the years Chris, in terms of people's attitudes towards disability generally?

CH: It's incredible the change there's been over my time involved with the Paralympic Games on almost any measure you take. To pick a few examples, if you'd asked me when I started out swimming, that for London we'd have all of the major broadcasters vying to win the TV rights to cover the Paralympic Games – incredible. To have all of the Olympic sponsors also signed up to the Paralympic Games, and putting major activations around the Paralympic Games, to shift over a million Paralympic tickets when we first put Paralympic tickets on sale – these are game-changing numbers, game-changing levels of involvement. And crucially, it will be a sensational summer of sport in 2012, but the real prize, even over and above all of those gold medal, world-record breaking performances the real prize is, if we nail it, the opportunity to fundamentally shift attitudes towards, and opportunities for, disabled people – that's a brilliant prize worth working incredibly hard for.

[10:30] PD: How do you think we can still improve people's attitude towards disability through sport?

CH: I think we've got a fantastic opportunity to change people's attitude towards disabled people through the power of the Paralympics. The Paralympics is the Games of the possible. It's getting

people in front of world-class Paralympic sport, enabling them to connect with it, to experience it, to just witness what is possible – extraordinary, extraordinary performance. And to take that key thought, that key experience, back into their lives, back into their local communities. Probably the start point of our bid really encapsulates that in one tiny, but incredibly important, fact – we said right from the bid, we believe that the most effective, the most efficient, way to plan and deliver Olympic Games, and Paralympic Games is with one integrated organising committee. And that message, that little nugget at the centre of everything that we do, that nugget of integration is so powerful to ripple out across society, not just in sport but in education, employment and society in general – it's an incredibly powerful and positive message.

[11:52] PD: Do you think if Sir Ludwig Guttman was alive today he would actually believe what has happened to the Paralympics, from those very small early days to what the Paralympics is today?

CH: I think if Sir Ludwig Guttman is looking down on what we're doing now, I hope that he would feel incredibly proud of what he started in 1948, and incredibly pleased with the journey that the Paralympic Games has been on. He had an extraordinary idea – to have a sporting event opening on the same day that the Olympic Games in 1948 opened and from that small acorn in Stoke Mandeville, a beautiful, beautiful small acorn, we're now going to have 4200 athletes from 165 nations competing in the London 2012 Paralympic Games. That's an awesome journey in just 64 years.

[12:52] PD: Do you think Stoke Mandeville has been instrumental in the development of all sorts of features in the Paralympics – technology and the different sports that are now available to disabled athletes? Do you think Stoke Mandeville has a very important part in that history?

CH: Stoke Mandeville is so, so important to the whole Paralympic movement and the Paralympic Games. The Games started in Stoke Mandeville in 1948 - a great British creation of which we should all feel so, so proud. It's coming home to London for the first time in 64 years and when you look at the work that has been done, the development at Stoke Mandeville, in terms of sporting opportunities across the piece, it absolutely remains an incredibly significant and more importantly than that, an incredibly special place which has an incredible significance today, as much as it did in 1948 and we, at London 2012, really wanted to reflect that and to draw on it. So when we launched our mascots, we really wanted them to have a story behind them, a narrative which young people could connect to so to be able to call the Paralympic mascot Mandeville, to really reflect that start point - incredible.

[14:19] PD: Just looking back at your very long and very distinguished career, the Games have changed out of all proportion during that period from 1988 all the way through to 2012, do you think that it's improved people's perception of what disabled athletes are capable of?

CH: I think the Paralympic Games has had, and will continue to have, such a profound impact on society, and just demonstrate the possible. Taking Seoul, my first Games, 1988, when we went out there we had a Foreign Office briefing before we went there saying "You know you've got to be careful here, there's no real sense of the disabled person in society in Korea so keep it quite low key when you're out there." When we were there, we were treated so, so well. The society was open to us, it was engaging, it was connective and you look at Korean society now and you see inclusion for

disabled people in education , in employment, across society. All of which was started from the fact of them hosting the 1988 Paralympic Games – that is a phenomenal legacy.

[15:40] PD: Is the same true of China as well, because in Beijing there was a lot of talk beforehand about a lack of inclusion, a lack of opportunity for disabled people, but that seems to have changed too?

CH: I think the Beijing Paralympic Games in 2008 had an incredible impact at the time and continues to. China is a huge, huge society. I think we all hope that that positive impact in 2008 continues, not just in Beijing, not just in the cities but crucially, across the whole of that nation.

[16:17] PD: The likes of yourself, Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson, Dave Roberts, have been incredibly successful as Paralympic sportsmen and women, but you've rather made a rod for the Great Britain teams back haven't you, as they've been more successful at each Paralympic Games. Looking forward to 2012, can Great Britain be successful once more?

CH: Without me in the team, I think they're totally stuffed! I think it's a brilliant position that Paralympics GB are in, second in the medal table in Beijing, 42 gold medals – that's a brilliant position to be in going into a home games. So many of us can have incredibly lucky sporting careers, how few of us get the opportunity to compete at a home games, in front of a home nation roaring you home. That is going to have such a positive impact, so second in the medal table going into a home games, it will be a stunning, stunning summer for Team GB and for Paralympics GB and I think the real beauty is, there's real strength and depth across all twenty sports. There'll be great gold medal performances in the pool, and on the track, but there'll be gold medal success across the whole Paralympic programme and again, that's something the whole nation should feel really proud of and I hope it's something the whole nation can really connect to and get behind.

[17:52] PD: When somebody eventually sits down to write the definitive history of the Paralympic Games, what do you think they might write about Chris Holmes?

CH: If the definitive history of the Paralympic Games were to be written, and I'm sure it will be one day, who can say what will be written about me. I wouldn't want to choose those words but I would hope it would say something about what I was lucky enough to achieve in Barcelona. I felt incredibly privileged to have that opportunity and to be in that shape to have done the best training I possibly could and to have come out of that Games with the six gold medals. I felt incredibly, incredibly lucky. And then, just the good fortune, having finished my sporting career as an athlete, to be involved in putting the London Games on. It would be absolutely awesome to compete in London 2012 – that's not an option for me, so to be given the job of directing the Games, for me to make sure everything's in place for those 4200 athletes to come and do the performances of their lives is just personally and professionally a fantastic opportunity and a great privilege to be doing that.

[19:24] What would you say Chris, as one of the elder statesmen of Paralympic sport in this country to a young athlete sitting down, watching television, thinking "one day that could be me, I'd love to have a go at that"? How would you encourage them, or persuade them that this could be the life for them?

CH: I think that what we'll see this summer from the Paralympic Games is phenomenal performances from so, so many different British Paralympians which will really serve as great, great

role-model performances and that can only have such a positive impact on young people across the nation. For people to see, to witness, disabled athletes at the peak of their performance competing on a world stage in London, winning gold, silver and bronze medals – that has to be so motivational. That's why we've been doing so much work through our London 2012 Get Set education programme – going round loads and loads of schools, it's a real privilege to be able to do that because you get in front of young people, you tell them your story, crucially you take their questions and it's such an engaging experience. It really is lighting those little sparks in the hearts and minds of young people to think "You know, sport could be for me. Maybe even the Paralympic Games could be for me." That's a fantastically positive thing and that should and will be such a massive part of the legacy from the 2012 Paralympic Games.

[20:13] PD: Have you got a lot to thank Paralympic sport for in your life?

CH: I'm incredibly thankful to Paralympic sport. It's given me an amazing life. Seventeen years travelling around the world, being lucky enough to represent Great Britain. To put that tracksuit on, it's such an honour to wear your nation's colours and now, to have got a profession out of it, in terms of organising the London Games, it's really such a meaningful thing to be involved with.

[21:52] PD: Chris, you don't just turn up to a Paralympic Games and win stacks of gold medals, so give everybody an idea of what sort of training regime you'd have to have gone through leading up to something like 1992?

CH: The training regime that I was involved with, for the five years before the Barcelona Games, was intense, full-time and full-on. I thought, right from the outset, that if I can be as good as I can be, I need to do the same training as the Olympic swimmers so I joined City of Birmingham club, trained with the Olympic swimmers up there, the same programme. That involved five hours in the water every day. Your alarm clock would go off at 4.30 in the morning. Imagine that on a cold, dark January morning. It's minus five outside and it's 4.30 in the morning. Nothing would make you want to get from under your quilt except one fact – not the possibility of winning a gold medal, but the fact that all the other guys on the team were waking up feeling the same and knowing they had to be at training because if you were having a bad day, they would pull you through and if they were having a bad day, it was your job to pull them through. So, be on the poolside at 5am, do two hours in the morning, up to 8000m. Again in the evening, another 8000m. Looking at a big week, 80,000m in the pool. That's 3,200 lengths of a standard pool. An hour in the gym every day. It's a full time, full on commitment but it's an extraordinary thing to be part of because you know exactly why you're doing it, you know the goals, you know the journey. And standing behind the blocks, just before the 100 freestyle in Barcelona, the final race in Barcelona, there's 9,500 Spaniards roaring for Pablo Corral, I closed my mind to that noise and the one thought that was in my mind, just before we get called to our marks, is for every arm stroke, for every pull I'll take in that race, I will have swam 2,000,000m in training. Such a positive, powerful, single little thought to be lodged in my mind as we get called to our marks, just before the gun goes.

[24:19] PD: And success in sport nowadays is not about the individual performer as it was back then, it's all about the support network that goes on around you. What sort of support network did you have?

CH: I couldn't have even got to the start blocks, never mind won any medals, without a phenomenal team of people around me helping, guiding, supporting me. Be that friends, family, sport coach, strength coach, dietician, physio - so, so many people go into making that single sporting performance. And imagine the 50 freestyle, the fastest race in the water, it's one length of the Olympic pool and it's all done in just over 20 seconds. But to make that 20 seconds performance not only takes thousands of hours and millions of metres of training, it takes that total team performance, everybody being committed to that end goal and everybody playing their part in the team. There's no such thing as individual success in sport at all, it's absolutely always a team performance.

[25:30] PD: Did you ever stand on the starting blocks fearful that if you failed you'd be letting down other people? Was that ever a motivator for you?

CH: I never had the fear of letting people down. I had an amazing strength, an amazing fire inside that had been generated from being part of that team, being part of the team at City of Birmingham, all the other swimmers, the coaches there, being part of the wider team, everybody who'd helped me. I didn't have a fear of letting them down, I had such a massive, solid, positive force gleaned from being part of that team. So, standing on the blocks at that stage everything is calm, everything is focused, everything is clear because the thoughts you had in the run-up to that are all about mentally rehearsing that race, visualising winning, and drawing all that strength from being part of such a solid, such a strong team and going into that race with that powerful force.