

Jane Blackburn: film interview at Stoke Mandeville Stadium, 10 August, 2012

Jon Newman interviewer

Could you begin by telling me about the circumstances that brought you to Stoke Mandeville?

I was going with a boyfriend to Silverstone to watch the Grand Prix; I was driving in a car taking my boyfriend and I to Silverstone to the Grand Prix and before we got about 4 miles from home the car turned over on a bad corner at Gatwick airport where they used to take the oil tankers in, and there was a bit of spillage on the road. I had a soft top car and in those days they didn't have roll bars, and I broke my neck actually, and unfortunately for my dad who was following us along because I was going to pick my granddad up, and he couldn't believe it, there I was on the side of the road. I was taken to the local hospital which was in Redhill in those days and I was there for a month and had traction in my head because I had a broken neck and they tried to keep the neck straight.

I was on what they called a Striker frame which is a bit like an ironing board; you're very, very straight on it and twice a day they flip you over and it was very frightening, it was really, really frightening. They put a mask on your face to hold your head in the hole and you're on a plank, well it feels like a plank, and they put this other plank on top of you which you've got your head sticking out of. Then they flip you over but they're saying "make sure you're flipping her the right way because if she flips the wrong way it'll pull the traction out of her head" so you're thinking "I hope they know what they're doing", you know it was awful. Then you're upside down for about 2 hours to relieve the back of you, your bottom and the back of your heels.

So this was a system for dealing with pressure sores?

Yes it was, and when I came up to Stoke eventually a month later I discovered that it was so old-fashioned that they didn't do it there anymore, they had what they called turning beds so the bed would just tilt a little bit and then it would tilt back, but we still had the sandbags in our backs to stop us rolling backwards but it was much better when I got here. Unfortunately the traction in my head had gone septic on both sides, when I got here they discovered that because they didn't dress them at all when I was in the other hospital so they'd gone pussy and when they came to take them out it really hurt as well. But when I was in the other hospital I did actually have a bone graft into my neck from my hip and they took out slivers of bone they said that were broken off and were lurking sort of thing at the back in my neck, and that's an operation that they wouldn't have done here, and I think when Dr Guttman actually looked at me and the X-rays he said it had been done very well although they wouldn't have done it here because it's too dangerous, but I think it has helped me over the years so that was one bonus. But he did actually come to see me when I was in Redhill and he was shocked that I hadn't been to the toilet for a month, and he had a fit and my legs had swollen up to about three times the size that they should have been. He called for the consultant: "Has this girl been to the toilet?" and he said "I don't know" and the nurses didn't know - and I hadn't.

You were just on a catheter?

No, well I had a catheter; no it was the other side sort of toilet. And so he went absolutely bananas, so they gave me something some potion or other and I did go, in fact I couldn't stop going and it was

just awful, he was so cross. And when he called the consultant he was a bigwig, this consultant in the hospital, and he spoke to him as if he was nobody, as if he was a fool.

So this was your first introduction to Dr Guttman?

That was my first introduction, yes, I was laying back like this, and this little man who seemed so small came and stood beside me and he was saying "What's going on?" and I was frightened of him really, I was frightened of the whole scenario. And I got up to Stoke Mandeville and nobody had said to me, "You've broken your neck"; nobody had told me anything, I'd just thought I'll be alright, you know, and I got up to Stoke Mandeville and lay in the bed there and people were whizzing by in wheelchairs and I thought "Uh, oh, something's going on" and eventually your physio comes and tells you what's happened and you just get on with it, because at 19 you don't have a choice really.

So how long was it from your accident to somebody categorically telling you what your condition was?

It was probably about 5 weeks. I think my mum and dad knew but they didn't tell me because I think the consultant told my mother that I'd broken my neck and would be bed-ridden for the rest of my life, and I think she fainted in the corridor. But I didn't know anything about that, you know, I was just getting on with it. And when I was told I was going to Stoke Mandeville I thought "where's that?" I thought it was up near Stoke-on-Trent; I didn't have a clue, no one mentioned Aylesbury or anything like that so I didn't know where I was going.

Tell us about the regime that went through in terms of physio

Very strict. You absolutely had to do everything and sometimes, especially with the occupational therapy (that I was absolutely hopeless at) dressing even I couldn't dress and my occupational therapy lady had such patience with me. She used to sit me up in bed and she'd give me my clothes and say "Right I'll come back in half an hour, see how you can do". And she'd come back, and because I'd got such long legs I was sitting up and my feet seemed to be miles away, I couldn't even reach them, and I used to eventually sort of hook one sock over my big toe and she'd come back and that's all I'd done. Because if I tried to sit up I just used to fall over and so when I got into the physio they used to sit you on a bench with no back and you had to do sort of balancing exercises, well I was hopeless, I was just all over the place.

And when I first looked in the mirror at myself I was shocked, because I had quite tight Levis jeans when I went in, and when I looked in the mirror I said to the physio "I think I've got someone else's trousers on" because I'd lost... I think I was 9 [stone] 4 [pounds] when I had my accident and I'm 5 foot 10 inches [high] and I was 7 stone when I got up, so I'd lost a fair bit of weight and thought I had someone else's trousers on. Also I had no hair here at the sides which was shaved off to put the traction in, and a sort of... (not Mohican because it was long)... but I just sat and cried. I thought "That's not me" but then I thought "Well come on, you've got to get on with it and try and do whatever you can to get yourself fit" and I did have a boyfriend when I was still in bed; he used to feed me and be silly and drop food all over my face, and he said to me "You're not so independent now are you" and I thought "Right, I will be, I hope, later" and I was at Stoke for nearly a year.

And your lesion meant that you were a tetraplegic and it was a much longer process?

Yes it was in those days, it doesn't seem to be such a long process now but it was a long process on the physio side of it and with the OT. I must admit I did used to try and hide in the toilets when it was OT time because I was just dreadful at it. I couldn't get in and out the bath, and although my lady had such patience with me and I was terrible at cooking and things like that (not that I'm much better now!) but just trying to do all that, I just hated it. But the physio I loved. I remember my mum saying to Ludwig, [Guttmann] "Why do you focus so much on her arms when we want her to walk?" and he said "Because your arms and hands are far more important, to her they'll be far more important than legs" which of course you don't realise at the time but how true that was, because you need to build up this part of you [points to upper arms] to be able to lift this bit of you which is so heavy. Well it's heavier now than it was then I must admit!

Given that long process of physiotherapy and developing the upper body, how did sport feature in that?

The main things that we had to do were archery and table tennis, and I loved them both. Well any sport I loved because at school I did rounders, tennis, everything else, but we didn't actually play table tennis or do archery so they were new challenges. I had to do archery with a hook, in those days they bandaged a hook on, and you drew the bow.

Because you didn't yet have the grip?

Yeah that's it, and you just turned your hand to release it. And I was quite good at archery, I did do quite well at archery but table tennis was my first love really so that's what I started to focus on, and when I went home I joined the club up at Stoke Mandeville called SPAC [Stoke Paraplegic Athletics Club] and used to drive from home every other weekend, stay up there in the old huts and play table tennis all day and all night you know. And I still actually play table tennis in the able-bodied league at home in Horsham.

Can you describe the particular satisfaction that you get from table tennis? What's distinctive about it?

I think, well it's competitive. It's the competitive side of it, I don't like to lose. And it keeps me fit, and table tennis is so... all you've got to take is your bat, you've got your bat and off you go. You know you haven't got loads of things to carry and you don't really need any help apart from when I first went home and had to find somewhere to play. I have played in the most unbelievable places. I've played in rugby changing rooms and the men have actually come in and changed while I've been playing, I've played in sports centres but I've had to go down into the basement and enter through the back door because there was no access in the old days. Everything is much better now, much better. I can play in all the away venues in my league at home now, when I couldn't originally in the 1970s when I first started.

So from playing table tennis as an individual how did you get into the process that took you to be able to participate in the Olympics?

Well from the club - SPAC - we had national games every year at Stoke Mandeville which I used to enter with the club. If you were good enough or won then you were picked for the international games that were held every year and from that you were perhaps picked to go for the Commonwealth games and if you progressed from that you would be picked for the Olympics, and so that was the preparation.

And which were the first games that you played at?

My first games were 1972 in Germany in Heidelberg, and then in 1976 in Canada in Toronto, and then in 1980 we were in Holland because we didn't get to Moscow, and then in 1984 we were here at Stoke Mandeville. Then I missed Seoul because they dropped the tetra class in the men's and women's table tennis, and then I went to Barcelona in 1992; that was my last Olympics.

Which was the best of those for you, or which do you remember?

Well always that first one I think, because you're so excited to get in the team and to be travelling off, even if it was not very far even just in Europe. And then Barcelona I really enjoyed too because that was my first time of having the same kit as the able bodied Olympians because when I first started that didn't do that, you just had a green tracksuit and for table tennis you had just a green T-shirt, two I think, which wasn't enough. Not too bad for the ladies but the men found it not enough and they used to try and get the girls to wash their shirts.

So what did you get in Barcelona instead?

We had exactly the same kit as the able bodied Olympians, we had so much stuff it was unbelievable. We had you know rather silly things like walking out shoes, things that we might not use again, but lots of the other teams wanted to swap so you did do a lot of swapping at the end which was good fun.

You mentioned that because you were in the 1984 team you would of course have come to Stoke Mandeville for the Paralympic games that took place here. How did they compare with the games either side? What was different?

Well it was like our yearly internationals for us, although of course it was much bigger, and they really did well because they didn't have that long to organise it because it wasn't meant to be here it was meant to be in America, and one or two things happened in America and at the last minute they pulled out. And so I think they only had about six months to get it organised so it was pretty good.

Ok we'll leave it there. Thank you Jane