

Interview with Mike Kenny at his home, 31 August 2012

Interviewer Jon Newman

**Could we start by you telling me about your accident and how you ended up in a wheelchair?
What happened?**

Well it was unfortunate for me because I shouldn't have been in work that day, I was actually covering for a colleague. This particular job we were doing was building some nuclear boilers and they're all built on separate rigs, a bit like oil rigs but smaller versions, and so I was on his rig when I had my accident. My ring was ok and I would have been ok.

What happened?

When they build these things they build them so that each new one has got a modification in it, so they were building this tank with tuning **baffles (?)** fitted. Now that's fine on a drawing but when you have to put them into practice, so they have to be designed, built, assembled and you have to make sure you have the clearance because once the nuclear evaporator starts up, if anything goes wrong you can't fix it you bury it. So it's important to try and get it correct. So I was there checking this job and I climbed up one ladder fine and I went round the other side and stepped on another ladder. It was a metal ladder on about a 5ft rig which is solid steel and runs on tramlines. The second ladder I stood on, it had the rubber on the bottom worn through but when you're up there you can't see the bottom of the ladder, you don't know. So I stood on it and down I came, and you know because it was solid steel I hit that [the steel base] with my heel, apparently, so the consultant said, and the shock went right through to my neck, you know. So I fell on the floor and got carted off to hospital and eventually I woke up only moving my eyelids at the time. Which was a little frightening, so say the least. I think the first few months you don't really realise what's happening to you because there's however many medics around you and people like OTs and what have you, and physios, you don't realise what's happened because you're so damn busy trying to do all of the things they're trying to tell you to do. I did speak to my wife and she said "no you'll be alright, you'll be alright." To be quite honest I'd never known anyone with a cervical neck injury before apart from I think when I was younger Manchester City's goalkeeper had one, Bert Troutman but he didn't become paralysed from it. I kept that thinking, you know, that in 12 months' time I'll be better, and nobody was telling me any different. I think they were all worried that, you know, I might end up dying before I got better. Anyway, eventually after a few months in the hospital there was a space found for me at Southport and that's the regional spinal unit. I went there and I didn't like it at all. I'd been pampered where I was, I'd had two nurses coming to look after me all the time, then I went to this strange place that was an add-on to the general hospital I think in eighteen-something, so you can imagine what it was like. Big Nightingale wards, it was a horrible place and some of the nurses I thought were horrible, but on unbeknownst to you it's there way of giving you tough love. They give you a rough time, like "you're breakfasts on there, get it" [points to side] then they come back and say "have you not eaten your breakfast?" Well you couldn't get it! There were all sorts of other things that were personal that used to happen, but eventually the lads from the unit came round, you know they call came round and chatted to me and said "can you do this, can you do that?" and I'd say "oh I can move me toe I think." You know what it was was spasm, I wasn't moving it was just

spasm. And I was thinking “oh god, I’ll be walking around next week.” Then the consultant came round to see me and said “don’t worry Michael, just continue to try and do your best every day. Try and get a little better each day, you’ll really get to like what’s going on because you’ll get stronger.” It took months and months and months to get stronger, I couldn’t even push myself up the corridor to get back to my bed, I had to have been in the gym doing training, you know exercises. In fact, when we got back to bed I quite often used to say to one of the nurses “can you just put that pillow there on me bed” and she’d lay it on the bed and I’d just flop on the bed sideways. I was exhausted! They’d come round at tea time and I’d be asleep, it was really weird. When you’d been there a couple of months you got into the system of what’s going on, and it’s quite exhausting really when you think about what you used to do.

So you started off with just that eyelid movement, how long did it take for you to get more than that?

When I was in the neuro unit at one of the other hospitals they put this, I can only think it must have been what they used to put all the patients in in 1940, it was a big metal thing and they used to hang things on it so they could hang me arms in these slings and springs, so I could be there all day. They’d put me legs in it, then they’d put what we used to learn in school, metal Faraday, you know Faradism. That hurt, that.

A kind of electric shock?

Yeah but it used to go on the bones, and it’d make your fingers move and things like that. So it was weird, you don’t notice it because it’s so slight you getting stronger to be able to move your shoulders. I was able to move shoulders but lots of friends in the unit, they couldn’t move anything you know. They were on a respirator or something, and thank god I wasn’t. I think after three months or something like that you begin to feel the benefit of all the exercises that they make you do. Not only that, it was the tough love thing at the hospital. They used to sometimes for a bit of fun throw your clothes at you and say “get dressed.” You hadn’t a cat in hell’s chance of getting dressed! But they’d throw them at you saying “go on get dressed Michael” and you’d say “right ok” and still be there waiting when they came back because you can’t get dressed on your own. You’ve no balance, balance was hopeless, and every time I used to sit up from being lying down I used to nearly faint. They used to have to tip the back of the chair up so that the blood went back to me head and I could function, because otherwise I couldn’t. I couldn’t see, everything was just whizzing away around me eyes. That was just blood pressure. As I say, after a while you get to really get into what’s going on at the hospital. A friend of mine used to be a police who broke his neck teaching some young kids to swim, called Jack Hall, we were best of mates in the hospital, he only lived up the road at Farnworth. So he and I used to pal out together at the hospital and we’d help each other do things, like in the afternoon we had gym but we had OT as well and that’s where you end up making something or sawing something and because I didn’t have any strong triceps or anything, trying to saw through a piece of Dowl shall we say three eighths, half an inch, I’d be there all day doing this [makes sawing motion]. I’d just say to Jack “can you put your hand on there while I do this” I just didn’t have the strength. He did that for me and a few other things. One of the girls, the OTs, and the physio suggested did anyone want to try and go swimming? A couple of us says “yes, that’s great, let’s go” because I was afraid of the water but not as some of the lads were. But once I was in the water I was fine. They’d take us once a week to the baths as Southport and once we were in the water I could float, especially if there were float aids around, and I found I was fine on them.

Obviously I was lying on my back because I couldn't go on my front, then I learnt to sort of paddle and keep myself in the water, and then I learnt to do a double arm backwards as though you're swimming with two arms backwards. I did that for quite a while, then when I got stronger I was able to actually alter the movement and then I was able to swim. What looks like normal backstroke, and that was really when I started to think I really enjoyed this and I'd like to continue.

Where you coached at all or helped, or was this something you taught yourself?

No, no, Marcy will tell you, I grew up near baths so I'd always go swimming. Marcy was a hairstylist so sometimes she'd work late so I'd be in before her and sometimes I'd leave a note on the fireplace saying "gone swimming, be back in an hour" you know. So I was never afraid of the water as such, I was concerned I might flip over and swallow a lot, but I was never afraid of the water. Then obviously after a while I got my old feeling back that the water wasn't going to hurt me, I could just paddle about on it and I felt fine, and then it was just a matter of trying to swim and the only way I could swim at the time was using backstroke and so I learnt to swim again using backstroke. It took me a long, long, long time to be able to do breaststroke and what you call front crawl. That took me an awful long time to do because you've got to go over with your arms but you've got to get your breathing right, if you don't get that right you're struggling. So that took me quite a long time to do, but as I say I was just getting to the end of this going to Southport with Jack when the charge nurse, Les Goldburn, he said to me "we're going down to the games at Stoke Mandeville, do you want to come?" and I was a bit worried about that because I'd never been anywhere like that before. I presumed it was going to be a bit like the hospital, lots of beds and people running around hither and thither. But it turned out to be a good thing to do because when I went down there, it was just a bit of a joke on my part when they said "oh somebody's not turned up, we need another swimmer can you fit in?" so I said "oh I don't know about that, I've only come to watch."

This was for the Southport team?

Yes. Anyway, eventually I ended up swimming and I think I won the race but I can't remember now. I thought "oh this is good" and I did a couple more swimming sessions and perhaps I did one more race there, and the people at Stoke Mandeville they take you in and they give you a medical assessment, and I went in and the medical assessor at the time just happened to be Pappa, or Guttman and he did my medical classification so I was able to swim in that class. Then I won a few more races and I think that powers that be, the international squad... I was just picked.

What year was that?

I think that was 1973 or 1974 I can't remember now. Anyway I was surprised that they picked me but obviously they pick you on times, so must have won the race but they must have picked me and thought "well he's as good as or better than what we've got swimming at the moment" so I think there were a few long faces when I got picked to swim from the other teams, because they wanted to swim as well.

Can you say a little bit about how the national games worked, was Southport a club as such?

Yes, yeah.

So you went with your club, and who else would be there?

The national games worked on a hospital club basis. I went with my club Southport, and then there would be Stoke Mandeville which was SPAC then there would be Lodgemore from Sheffield, Hexham and there was Pinderfields. I can't remember the others now.

So a lot of northern clubs?

There were a lot of clubs from all over the country, and there was real camaraderie between each other, but in between the camaraderie everyone wanted to beat everyone else, you know, don't run away with the idea that we liked each other so we all let each other win. We never let anyone win! And that's the way the club system worked, and it was fantastic. I don't know whether they have anything like that these days, whether they have taster weekends or whatever for the newly injured so that they can actually have a look and have a go at certain sports, but I don't know whether they have the camaraderie or whether they all meet like we used to meet and compete in half a dozen different sports. You know you can be swimming then the next day you could be on the track then the next day you could be on the field events, I mean these were all really enjoyable and made time go quicker while you were there. A lot of good athletes came out of these nationals, you know, because they'd try one thing then they'd try two or three other things and they'd say "oh yeah, I prefer that" to whatever else was on offer.

So you started off with swimming, that was the one that you naturally developed, but what were the other sports that you then moved across into?

A sport I moved across into was track and field, at the time I was down there I held the record for track and field events. I also did table tennis singles and also accompanied one of my team mates from Southport in doubles and things like that. I did rifle shooting, only did that a couple of times because it was difficult to try and fit things in that you wanted to do. I think I did some bowls and what have you, things like that, carpet bowls.

Could you explain the different categories of track and field events that you would do?

In the track field we did the hundred, the two hundred and four hundred and that was it, I was dead then, dead! Dead man moving round the track! But the field events were the shot-put, the discus, we didn't do the javelin it was too dangerous, I think they thought we might kill someone with the javelin. So obviously I enjoyed that. We used to go around and have different games at different hospitals, so instead of just having Stoke Mandeville, during the year you'd go around. Different hospitals would have different sports days and open days and so it was good to go and see these places and compete there. You know, it all jelled at the end of it into becoming the nationals at Stoke Mandeville and then the international world championships which inevitably led to the Paralympics at the end of that every four years.

So which was your first international?

I think it would be like 1974, something like that. I think it was that, because the first Olympics was um...

Toronto?

Yeah

1976?

Yeah, first Olympics was Toronto, and I found that quite arduous. We stayed in York University and I happened to be staying in the same room as Philip, as he is now Sir Philip Craven, chair of international Paralympic committee. He stayed in my room. We had, well I had, quite a bit of trouble just accessing the toilets there because they had metal poles around everything, and it was a work of art to get past the metal poles onto the loo! Honestly it was just chaos.

What were you all doing at York University?

Staying there, we stayed at York. The actual place where we had the games was something like Toby Park or something. It was alright, I enjoyed, but I think the Paralympics were just getting going then, in fact I think Sir Ludwig's daughter saying she remembers the first real Paralympics that she can remember anyway, was the 1976 one where it all came together. It's got bigger since, but that's when it properly all melded and you got lots of different people coming. So I think it must have been 1976 that it started to get better, well in her eyes anyway. I think when I won my first medal there, that was the most important one. I think your first ones always the most important. You can't believe you've won a medal, an Olympic gold medal, when you actually do. So when I did win it and you've got the national anthem going up for the first time, that's special, special for you but you're also thinking it's special for your country as well.

Which race was that you won?

You know I couldn't tell you! I'm being truthful I couldn't tell you, honest.

But it was a swimming one?

Oh obviously, I only did swimming. I only did three – backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle. I would imagine it was backstroke, and also I used to do backstroke and freestyle at one stage because that was my fastest stroke.

We were talking about classification earlier; remind us what was your classification?

Mine was 1A, it was like the bottom class. There was 1B, 1C, class 2 then 4 and all sorts on top of that. The Paralympics now have altered the classification system, they call it LEXI, I have a little trouble trying to follow it all myself now so I don't know how ordinary or lay people who've never been in the games, they must find it quite difficult.

So a swimmer competing in your classification would be a LEXI?

That's the name, LEXI, it's just like a figure but they cut bits off it. But you know, it won't tell you where you've got a muscle or haven't got a muscle, where you've got your balance or don't have your balance, that type of thing. So I would imagine it's fairly easy for a lot of the athletes to understand but it's more difficult for a lay person and as I say we didn't have that type of system. It was a slightly different one so I can only go off what system we had. When I was swimming we swam under a slightly different system, now they've modified it and changed it. I don't know whether it's to give more people a chance but sometimes you have quite different disabilities competing against each other. I don't know whether everybody understands it, I think they'll get there in the end it's

just a matter of persisting with it until the general public gets used to it. Perhaps this one and the next one they'll get to know the breakdown of it.

You were saying that it was Guttman back in 1973 that first classified you?

Yes

Did you know that he was important when you met him?

Oh yeah, I knew who he was, because Lesley Goldburn, the man who took me down there, was the charge nurse in charge of the first aid place they had there. So, if I can call him Pappa, Pappa was always popping in, speaking to him, and if I was down there I'd probably talk to Les more than other people because obviously I knew him better. His little first aid room was right next door to the baths down there, I don't know whether it's like that these days, I've not been down there for a while.

Did you come away with any impression of Guttman from that meeting or any subsequent ones?

He seemed like a nice man to me, he seemed as though he was always in a hurry running here, there or everywhere, but he seemed a nice man and seemed to be able to get things moving when things weren't moving properly or you were having a problem with something. I imagine he'd just come in and sort it out, if they disagreeing with classifications or things like that at the end of the day they'd send for him, he'd sort it out. I found him fine. All the doctors and nurses down there were fine, they did what they had to do. In them days they did what they were told to do and that was the end of it, then you were put in a class.

Going back to the Olympics, so Toronto in 1976 was your first Olympics and you continued to compete up until Seoul in 1988. Were you competing against people who you got to know from other countries? Were there rivalries?

Oh yeah, yeah! As I say there was fantastic camaraderie but there was also rivalry, really brutal rivalry. You'd always get someone throwing a protest against you saying this, that or the other.

Accusing you of cheating?

Well sometimes they used to say "you shouldn't be in that class, you should be in the other class" and this went on throughout all the sports. Everyone was branded as being in the wrong class or whatever.

People feigning a greater degree of disability to be in a lower class you mean?

Yeah, I suppose so, but the point was in this, I can only tell you from swimming really, they took it from your physical attributes, you know muscles and what have you, and also what you were like in the water. Now you could be one class out of the water and another class in the water, and that was where the dilemma was for a lot of people. It was the same if you were in track and field, you may have an advantage in some way if you were doing track or field over somebody else and to try and interlock all these things together was a nightmare.

So you could have a different series of classifications for different sports?

Yeah in theory; I don't know whether you can these days.

Though of course today most people only compete in a single sport, while you were all offering a range of sports?

Yeah, yeah, well the more sports the more chance you had of getting in the internationals. That's the way it used to work in them days. It did work as well, it did work. Everything used to run fairly on time and fairly smooth, there were one or two hiccups but I think it went ok.

I was asking you about your international rivals, who were they?

Don't ask me there names because er... Manfred Ebelman the German... no I can only remember... Lucca was Italian, there was a couple of lads from Sweden, Jorgen Erikson. All the Scandinavian countries and the European countries they all had good swimmers.

And you'd compete against them every year at the internationals?

Regularly, yeah. You'd get a program and look for your name and they'd look at it and say "I'm gonna beat you this year Kenny", being foreign they quite often didn't call me Mike, they'd just say Kenny. And I accepted that. It never bothered me you know, I used to say the same to them "you've got no chance, go home!" and they'd start laughing. In fairness, if you won, we used to get lifted in and out of pool, you have to around the pool in your chair and you're going round all the different teams and they'd all be saying "well done, well done, well done."

Obviously there was something of language barrier but would you socialise with other teams?

Oh yeah you'd see them and might go for a drink or whatever, you'd see them at lunch because everyone sat with everyone else. You'd chat as best you could, and if they were in your sport then you'd have something to talk about. But I think mainly we did talk about sport. And with swimming we used to the even in the morning, right, and then we'd do finals in the evening so I never wanted me tea. Who'd want their tea? You've got to sit at the poolside then get in the pool and you might be doing one swim or you might be doing three, I don't know, but I could never stomach my tea.

Four Olympics from Toronto 1976 to Seoul in 1988; what were the differences between them?

I think that the earlier ones were done, I can't say on the cheap, but they were done rather inexpensively. Now the Korean one, they'd gone all out trying to impress. They'd built a little village for us to say in which was going to be communal housing afterwards for Korean people. What impressed me there was the road, they'd got like 12 lane highways, and we had police outriders shepherding the bus along the roads and we had helicopters to make sure nothing went wrong which was quite impressive really. I thought it was very good. Everything seemed to be organised except that myself and a couple of colleagues were on floor 13 and there was one lift, but on the outside they had a ramp all the way the way up. So I came down there!

Thirteen floors down a ramp?

Yeah I came down there a couple of times. It doesn't do much for your breaks and your rubber tyres! Because sometimes the lift was so blocked you couldn't move, and I suppose really if you've got finger grip it was a good way of getting down, a lot of the lads used to use it. It was a bit dodgy for me but I did do it a couple of times because you couldn't wait for the lift, you just wouldn't get it.

So Seoul was your last games, and presumably the contrast between that and Stoke Mandeville just four years earlier must have been quite pronounced?

It was. I said to a colleague that I thought we'd been shafted really by the Stoke Mandeville games because we should have been in America. Now if America can't afford to pay a few pounds for the Paralympics then why does it keep getting the Olympic games and god knows what? The money must have gone somewhere into somebody's pocket. You can't say you're setting up a four year thing to arrange to put on the games and then at the last minute "we haven't got the money" or "we've not got the facilities." It's too late then, isn't it? It was just fortunate that we had Stoke Mandeville to put a games on. Not as big as we wanted to put on but it still went on, it was a games. Holland was alright, we were like in an army camp and we had soldiers to go in and out through the front gates. They arranged for us to go around to a few places, clog makers and god knows what, but on the whole it wasn't bad.

That was Arnhem in 1980?

Yeah it wasn't bad there, it wasn't bad at all. I think the smallest I can remember it being I think was Canada. That seemed very small to me when you consider what we've got now. I mean the aquatic centre, it was a large pool but by the time you've got competitors and spectators all of a sudden the thing was full so you didn't have that much room to manoeuvre around. It was like being back home. But the people were excellent, they did everything they could to make our stay worthwhile. I think it was Yonge Street, I think it's supposed to be the longest street in the world or something, but we were going down there one day and there was a couple of ladies of the night shouting from the windows up above for us all to in, which was quite funny at the time because no one's going to get up three flights of stairs to see these ladies, even if we wanted to! I really enjoyed the time there but I did injure my shoulder... no, that Canada. We had like school buses, those yellow busses they take the kids to school on. They'd taken all the seats out and we all rolled in, the somehow something went wrong at the front of the coach and he had to brake, and I just remember that we all concertina-ed up, like something out of a joke, but I went forward and hit my shoulder on the handle of the guy in front's wheelchair. That was really painful and I had to go and get some medical treatment for it. The doctor there said "you've probably burst a blood vessel or something, if we put the ice on and keep treating it with that it'll go down and you should be able to swim alright." Eventually after a few bags of ice were carted around I seemed to be alright the next day.

I think you must have been alright because you got three gold medals in Toronto

Yeah ,what I did that I suppose is unique, I don't think anyone else has done it, I got the same medals I won consecutively for four Olympics, except the last two Olympics instead of having three I went for five. By then the system had become "oh yeah they can swim a bit further" so we were pushing the boundaries to swim 50m and 100m, and they would say "oh you can't do that."

So the golds you won at Toronto and Arnhem, what distance were they?

They were 25 metres.

Then you got five golds and a silver at Stoke Mandeville and the others, so that was for 25 and 50?

Yeah I swam 3 x 25

A relay?

No not a relay, a medley. The only trouble was we only swam three because they didn't have butterfly for us, that pushing it a bit much to try and get cervicalals to swim butterfly.

Was it a stroke you could do?

Not really, it was too difficult. I could get my arms over but I couldn't envisage doing 25 or 50 metres of it at that time because it was so difficult. The rest of your body's sort of pulling you down and you're trying to get your arms over. It's more difficult than you think for someone with a cervical injury. It's not impossible but it's more difficult. I think you would've had to have had a lot of special exercises and training to do it, and like you say I was already watching my shoulders because the consultant had said, be careful what you're doing. You don't over-do something because if you do and you put your shoulder out of joint or damage it, it'll just put you out of the games. One time I did the 3 x 25 individual medley. As I say, it took me years to get my strokes right. Quite often when I did breast stroke my hands would go into spasm. As I'm pulling myself forward they'd sometimes go into spasm and lock up, and you can't free it up while you're swimming you just have to hope it comes free.

And if it doesn't you sink?

No if it doesn't you just carry on swimming with your fists like that [makes clenched fist], you can't do anything else because you're in a swim. You can't say "oh excuse me, can you hold it while I stretch my hand out" because it doesn't work like that. After a minute it'll just go back to how it was, but the problem is it's not locked as such now but when I was swimming and it went into spasm it did lock. It's like having a fist and you can't do anything about it. You just had to hope you'd do a couple of strokes extra and it would loosen off.

Because it's a lot less efficient?

Yeah precisely. You just had to hope it would ease off. You could've been halfway down the pool when it happened and you just carry on and hope that it stops and you can swim properly, but we got through it. But as I say, I really enjoyed swimming just full stop, I enjoyed it, it was great. I think for anyone who's injured it's the most beneficial thing to do because the water gives you buoyancy and you're not going to come to too much trouble if you use a buoyancy aid. After Korea I wanted to do something else, I couldn't keep going on because if you look at the dates and my age and what have you, I was knocking on then.

How old were you at Korea?

I was about 43, 44, I was knocking on then. I mean I could've gone to... was it Spain the next one? I can't remember now.

Yes Barcelona

I could've gone but I thought to myself "do I want to keep doing this?" and then eventually the inevitable happens, you burst your balloon so to speak and someone beats you at the Olympics and you think "oh I wish I'd finished before." I got the choice and I choose... I wanted to do that, there were other things I wanted to do.

So you went out on a high?

Well that was intention yeah, yeah. I think a lot of sportsman go out like that, too many go on just a little bit too long and they end up playing football in very poor leagues, boxers end up getting knocked out because they've gone one fight too many. Your body does tell you something even in imperfect condition, it will tell you that you're reaching the extremities of what you can do without hurting yourself. I'm just glad that I was able to do it, and if I was to give advice to anyone that was injured it would be to take up swimming, even just for enjoyment and you don't want to swim in the games. It's for cardiovascular... it's good for everything and the water will take the weight of your body, you don't need to worry about it.

Talking about photographs:

1. This is a photo of me I think at the Stoke Mandeville Paralympics in 1984 where I won five gold and one silver. The silver was in the relay and the golds were all medals I'd won earlier.
2. This was a picture of the British Paralympic swimming team for the games in Stoke Mandeville in 1984, it's nice to see some old faces that I recognise. There's Chris Holmes at the back, he's a Welsh lad, Brian Dickinson from Southport, Alison was the coach, Alan West there. Unfortunately he died last year. There's Isabelle Bar who's married now, I can't remember her married name. I'm afraid I can't remember some of the names of all the people who were in the squad. There's Kenny Kearns at the back, Scots lad.

And this is in the grounds at Stoke Mandeville?

Yes, in fact you can probably see there a bit of the building itself. I think they took it through an upstairs window or something.

3. This is a picture of me, the gold medal winners had been invited to Osterley Park in Middlesex to a ball with Princess Di. It was a lovely evening.