

Interview with Naomi Riches MBE on Friday 25 January 2013 at Marlow Rowing Club

Neil Young interviewer

NR = Naomi Riches (interviewee)

NY = Neil Young (interviewer)

NY: To begin with Naomi, I thought it would be really useful to just, kind of, start at the beginning and talk about, well, first things first – it some ways to get it out of the way it would be helpful for you to talk about what your specific disability is so that people know that

NR: OK. Erm. When I was eight weeks old I was diagnosed with an eye condition called cone dystrophy which means that the cones in my retina don't work so I'm – basically my whole world is like a black and white film slightly over-exposed, slightly blurry. So I've got no colour vision at all, my detail vision is poor and the brighter it gets the less I can see.

NY: OK. And what would you say – in general terms – has the impact of your disability had on your life overall?

NR: I think when I was younger it had a bigger impact because I'd be trying to learn things the same way that people that could see were leaning things and it didn't work. So I had to learn to learn in other ways. But as I get older I think as I get older I think the only thing now for me is I can't drive which means I have to rely on other people – boyfriend, mum or taxi companies which tend to cost quite a lot of money so [laughs] so, yeah, I think that's really the only major impact now. It's just my able-ness to get around.

NY: And I know we were talking a bit before but in terms of its affect on your athletic career how would you talk about it in that way?

NR: Well, at school they did try and make me play lacrosse and tennis and rounders and rugby and football and anything that I couldn't see the ball with [laughs] which really wasn't particularly enjoyable in any way shape or form and caused an awful lot of – well it caused hilarity for most of the class and absolutely devastated me because I'd feel just incapable and got an awful lot of stick for it. And I grew up wanting – out of all things – to be an artist, which is a very visual thing but something that you can also do with sound, something you can do with just with light and dark, something you can do with texture; there are so many forms of art. So the idea of being this sportsperson was about as far from my, you know, career aspirations as could possibly have been. I – yeah – I didn't ever see myself doing sport. I enjoyed trampolining and self-defense at school as extra curricular activities – that was about it – and did some swimming at a disabled swimming club on a Saturday night so that was it really.

NY: And you are quite humble, the way you are talking about it, but you did really well, didn't you in the swimming?

NR: Yeah, I did quite well. It just so happened that I was quite quick and they kept sending to

swimming galas and then they sent to the London Youth Games and then I was national disabled swimming champion for swimming clubs – disabled swimming clubs – around the country – held their championships at Leamington Spa. So I was good in terms of the average person that swims that doesn't do a specific sort of training – I had a natural ability for it but I did get the opportunity, when I was high school I think, I was about 12 or 13 to go and train with the Harrow Disabled Swimming Team in the morning before school. Now wanting to be an artist does not mean getting out of bed at five o'clock in the morning and going to the swimming pool and training “no thank you very much!” so I sort of knocked that on the head and I think to myself now “I wonder where I'd be if I'd actually followed that through?”

NY: It's interesting. It makes me think two things – obviously you were having a difficult time at school around sport yet, I wonder what it was like having the swimming being such a successful thing at the same time.

NR: Yeah, it's a funny one because then my mum would always, bless her, very proud, would always say “take your medals into schools and show them” and that used to get me even more horribleness from the other girls because it was something I happened to be good at and they would give me stick for it and it just, so it ended up with me not really enjoying the success with my peers because I would just get a hard time for it. So, I think the main problem at school was I didn't look – that I had no obvious disability, even though I was wearing tinted glasses that were thick as jam jar bottoms as they say and I had a learning assistant and was sat at the front of the classroom but I was really good at art and graphics, so the whole, sort of, thought process for the other girls was “she must be lying, she must be making it up – of course she can see she can do art”. So that's what I got all the stick for was “you're only, you're only not doing things that you don't like and you're blaming it on your eye sight”. That was the whole general idea behind any nastiness at school. So I didn't really enjoy, didn't really get the opportunity to enjoy success.

NY: And I wonder what sort of support did you have at that point when you were swimming and before you took up the rowing – what kind of support did you have from family or any friends?

NR: The best support – my family, they couldn't have been better. They were absolutely fantastic. They always let me do what I enjoyed doing and encouraged me in the best possible way. It was purely the peer groups at that time wouldn't accept it the way the family would and the friends outside school would.

NY: So, in terms of your family, are you talking about your parents?

NR: Yeah – Mum, Dad (I've got no brothers or sisters) and close family to them – their parents and cousins and aunts and uncles – all very supportive all the time and still are.

NY: Great [pause] and so somehow, like, I mean, how did rowing fall into your world because it is quite an interesting story – you were swimming and then you went to college...

NR: I was swimming and then I went away to boarding college – the College for Blind and Visually Impaired People in Worcester where I went from being – the least disabled, sorry the most disabled person in the school to suddenly to having the least visual problems out of

everybody there. So, that was quite a turnaround. I went from being the least able to the most able. I didn't really do much more in terms of swimming. I was pretty active – I was always running about doing stuff but, erm, had a go at rowing – a brief sort of try. I went to Leander Rowing Club in Henley for Midland Television, I think, in 2000 to row with Matthew Pinsent, Steve Redgrave, Steve Foster and Ed Coode with a few other kids from the school and Matthew Pinsent said: "Have you done this before? You're all right you are. You're not bad." And I completely ignored him and didn't do anything about it for years and then in the second year of university where I was doing a jewellery and metalwork degree – of all things, do that when you can't see very well, it's really, really clever [laughs] but, you know, I got a phone call then from the then coach of Paralympic Rowing – or adaptive rowing as it was back then – who said: "I hear you're tall, you're registered blind and you like rowing. In which case you tick three boxes and we'd like you to trial for the team." That was in April 2004 and in July 2004 I was sat on the start line of the World Championships going: "What, what happened? [laughs] What happened there?" There was me being a university student, you know, student-union-snakebite-a-pound-a-pint-before-eleven-o'clock – all well and good – and then suddenly I'm at a World Championships for a sport I've only done for four months. It was a complete whirlwind.

NY: So what happened in those four months?

NR: I travelled backwards and forward to London quite a lot. We trained at London Docklands and when I could I would take myself down to the gym to get my fitness a bit better to be honest. I was just an unfit average student-kind of person so the idea of doing elite sport was a little bit bizarre. But I would say back then we weren't really elite, we were all disabled people – Paralympic rowing or adaptive rowing was very new and the standard wasn't all that high back then. So as long as you had a bit of an idea of what you were doing and you had a bit of determination and a bit of strength you could kind of get away with it. I have been really lucky to have been in the system since 2004 because that's nearly nine years and I have seen huge changes over those years and I feel I'm very lucky to have been part of that. To go from right the way when we were back not really knowing what we were doing to now being, you know, a highly respected elite sport that's working alongside its Olympic equivalents in training.

NY: And what would you say were the most important changes over that nearly nine years?

NR: I think, to begin with, it was just a case of us proving that we were worth the governing body etc putting the money into and putting the support into. We had a coach and he wasn't full-time and I think it was just voluntarily. Our cox did it voluntarily [corrects herself] and us four we didn't really have – I think we borrowed a boat at one point and we'd take ourselves to say Alan's house in Derbyshire and we'd stay there for a week and we'd train at his club with a borrowed boat. There was no money in the system and we were doing it because we enjoyed doing it. And I think after we'd been a couple of times, a couple of years to the World Championships and won two gold medals [pause] and then – that was about 2005 rowing became the next Paralympic sport to debut at Beijing so suddenly everybody was interested. And because we'd already proven we were of a certain standard – however low that standard is in comparison to now – we then got funding, we then got a coach, full-time over from Australia, we got our own boat – things like that, things had started to improve. And then gradually we proved ourselves year on year and with that we've earned more in terms of the system around

us; strength and conditioning, physio, psychology – all those things.

NY: And along the way you won lots of medals.

NR: Along the way I won lots of medals, which is really quite exciting.

NY: Yeah. Does any one stand out or do you have a feeling about all of them?

NR: All of them were pretty spectacular. The first one I had only been rowing for four months, the second one they suddenly doubled the distance in 2005 and we did 2k and we absolutely smashed everybody else – won it by quite a large margin. And that was in Japan so that was really exciting; it was really far from home. And 2006 it was the World Championships at Eton_ Dorney so it was in front of the home crowd and it was the first time that my parents had been there and that was really exciting. And then it 2007 and we lost to the Germans by 1.62 seconds so that wasn't quite so good. And then it was Beijing year and it was suddenly we were going to the Paralympics which was the first time that the Paralympics had been at, had been– delete that bit [laughs] – the first time that rowing had been in the Paralympics so that was exciting in itself and we wanted to be the ones who came first, who got in the history books, and we didn't, we came third. Everything went so well that year – we won all the events leading up to Beijing – and everything went brilliantly until the heats and then we came second in the heats. Had to race the reps the following day and then had to race the finals on the third day and we came third – very disappointing.

NY: What do you think happened?

NR: I don't know. Possibly complacency to a certain extent, I don't know. Everyone thought: "oh the GB are going to win because we had won everything that season by quite a clear margin." So we went into the heats going: "we know what we've got to do, we know that we can do this" rather than "we're confident we can do this" it's "oh no we know we can do it". And I think that was complacency to a certain extent and then we realized half way through the race that it wasn't going the way we thought it would and then I think we possibly went into panic mode, ever so slightly, and didn't pull out our best performance. On the reps day we did a much better performance, we had a much more relaxed race because, it sounds like a bit of a contradiction when you say relaxed race but if you are tense you won't get as much out of yourself as if you are relaxed. But at the same time you need to be able to switch on in the right places to bring on that aggression, but it is sort of relaxed aggressive – it's so hard to explain it but, erm – relaxed aggression I think is the only way to put it. And then on the finals day I think we felt the pressure and we knew what could happen and we knew what wanted to happen and we knew they were very different things and we ended up coming over the line third. I didn't know that. When I race I have to wear blacked-out goggles so I can't see what is going on at all because all visually-impaired rowers have to wear those. We crossed the finish line and I knew we weren't first because my crew weren't cheering and I knew we weren't last because I could hear there was a boat behind us but I didn't know where we had come. I didn't know whether we were second or fifth or whatever so I had to ask where we'd come and when Vicki [Hansford] said third I was completely devastated. I was on the other side of the world to all my friends and family, nobody had been able to afford to come out and watch and all I wanted to do was go home. I just didn't want to be there any more and it was absolutely horrible, the

most awful feeling, especially when you know you haven't done the best you could've done. If we had had our best performance and it had been perfect and we had still come third simply because the others were better, it would have been easier to deal with. But because we hadn't done a particularly good job – I think, in my opinion, I hope my crewmates agree with me when they see this [laughs] but yeah, I think that made it more painful.

NY: And how did you deal with that the minutes, hours, days after that?

NR: Erm, I thought: "I'm in Beijing, I'm in Beijing for another week. What am I going to do? I'm gonna enjoy it, I'm gonna be a tourist" [laughs] So I went and did the Great Wall and the silk markets and Tiananmen Square and all of those things – absolutely brilliant, such a good week, but I still just wanted to get home. I went to the Great Wall with one of my colleagues who was in another boat class – the mixed double – and she's in a wheelchair and we went to the accessible bit of the Great Wall of China – but we didn't get told that once you went up the ramp you could either go left or right and one way was accessible and the other wasn't and we went to the wasn't. So me and a girl in a wheelchair went up the Great Wall of China and I would pushing her up the hill and I she would be pumping with her arms trying to get herself up and it was ridiculously steep and we had Chinese people looking at us looking at us, going: "What are you doing, what are you doing, mad?" But we sort of conquered the Great Wall of China, it was absolutely brilliant – such a good memory that, brilliant.

NY: Erm, and so obviously it sounds like there's probably quite a big contrast between Beijing, much as you achieved something extraordinary by getting a bronze – and what happened – I mean do you maybe want to talk about the run up and the differences, the highs and lows for last year how that went?

NR: Well I've been thinking about it and as I said in Beijing everything was going great until we started racing. In London everything was going great but we were very aware of how close people were to us because we had raced the Germans at the World Cup in June and it was a photo finish and we knew they would have improved as well. So, we knew not to sit back and chill. We would have to put in a damn good performance. The Germans weren't in our heat, which was good because it meant that we only had [interruption]... So 2012 was a very different kettle of fish to 2008. Firstly we were a lot more professional and we had raced together as a crew in exactly that order in 2011 and done really well at the World Championships in Bled, in Slovenia – Slovenia, yes Slovenia. And so we knew we were good and we knew we were capable of winning but also knew we weren't going to take for granted that fact. Erm, we'd come so close to the Germans in the World Cup. We didn't know how much they had improved by in, you know, the three months in between. We knew we'd improved – they might have improved more, they might have improved less, we don't know. But they weren't in our heat so we had the crews that we weren't sure of in our heat and we didn't know what to expect from them. There were some quite new crews there: the Chinese that had just got together the year before and qualified for the Paralympics at the Bled Regatta at the World Championships. And new crews will develop a lot quicker so we didn't know how much better they would be than the year before: an awful lot of unknowns. So we went in just knowing that we were doing one more thousand-metre piece on the water – that was all it was. [We've done thousand metres in training over and over again. We were doing one more piece](#)

and it just so happened there were five other boats trying to get there first before us. But other than it was just do what you know, stick with what's familiar and what you've rehearsed over and over and over again. And if you do that and you do that the way you've done it before you can only be happy with your result: so that's what we went into the heats with. We won the heat so we didn't have to race the reps the following day and then we went into our final, which seems like so long ago [laughs]. It was only, what, six months but honestly it feels like years – so much has happened since it has been a bit mad really.

So on the Finals day we went for our pre-paddle before the late close for racing. We were the last race of the day – before us we had the women's arms only single skull; final A women's arms only single skull, final B; men's arms only single skull A, men's arms only B; mixed double A, mixed double B and then there was our race. So the race had to close fairly early and then we had quite a little while to sit and chill and eat and listen to iPods and stupid music and wind each other up about various things and generally enjoy each other's company whilst being terrified and nervous all at the same time. Erm, so we did our pre-paddle and it was incredible how many people had already turned up at Eton Dorney at that early in the morning. It got to the point where our coach had to stop coaching us cycling along the towpath because we couldn't hear her through the radio because the crowd was already so loud in the grandstand before the race had even started – it was absolutely amazing, it was just magic. The atmosphere down at Dorney was just incredible. They had turned this very two-dimensional landscape – this two kilometre-long lake and boathouse at one end and nothing else and suddenly there were grandstands and big screens and this overhead camera – which they didn't use for us anyway – but, you know, this incredible almost rowing stadium that they created. And the crowd were just, they were brilliant, they were absolutely brilliant, they just brought the whole thing to life. So to go out for your pre-paddle and almost be able to hear your mum and dad shouting at you from the grandstand it just makes you feel proud and makes you feel nervous because you want to do what they want you to do. Nervous because you want to do what you've practiced with the coach over and over again. I, for me, I was terrified that I'd be the one to do something wrong and let my crewmates down. You know, there are so many different emotions going through the system at once, erm, and it's just you get your pre-paddle out the way you can chill out then a bit. It's kind of like: "OK, if something was going to go wrong it would have gone wrong then – it's fine."

Saying that we got on the water for our final and we heard the race results of our men's arms only single skull who won the gold medal in Beijing, who had been unbeaten in every race he'd ever entered in six years and he'd just come fourth. [Big breath out] "OK, right so. That's not good but you've gotta leave that, you can't dwell on that. You are going for your Paralympic final, you can't think about it." And it is so hard to get that out of your head so we then got a hundred metres down the warm up lake at Dorney and there was a bit of tinkling coming from my rigger, erm, and so I called to Lily, our cox, to stop. And one of the bolts on my rigger to my right-hand side had just come completely loose. So the bolt was there but the nut and the washer underneath were gone. So we had to row in pairs, just the boys rowing, up to the thousand metres to the cut through to the main lake and yell to the umpires that we needed a spanner. So they sent us through to the repairs pontoon who got us a spanner, who fixed our rigger and they then let us warm up in our lane on the lake, on the racing lake. Which was kinda

cool because we got to see what the conditions were exactly going to be like for our final which was a good thing. And then whilst backing on to the start we got a little bit tangled in some of the buoys. I've got these goggles on, I can't see what's going on – my blade got stuck in the buoys. So Dave, who was in front of me had to take my blade out of my hands and maneuver it out. And we're starting to go: "oh God, oh God, we've only got two minutes, the race starts in two minutes – we're not attached – oh my God" – starting to panic but trying to keep calm.

We got on the start, there's about thirty seconds to go so we didn't have time to get nervous. We just sat there and then we were off. Suddenly I was like mayhem of the first two hundred and fifty metres. Such a huge amount of noise because there was crowd right the way down to the start at Dorney so there were people shouting and then there were the five other coxes and then was our cox and there was all the other boats you could hear, all the oars coming in and out of the water there was just so much noise. And when I've got these goggles on and I'm just trying to focus on what I can hear it's quite hard to drown everything else out.

But two hundred and fifty metres, OK, that's gone, that's fine: where are the Germans? Right, we know they're fast, we know they have a, you know, their first five hundred is always quick. Right they're in the lead. OK, fine, they're in the lead we knew that might happen. Our rhythm got to think about what we know. What do we do at this point? The middle five hundred, that's our killing ground, this is where we make our move, this is where we stay solid we stay together. Five hundred, the Germans are up. How much by? Half a boat length: shit, so now what? Now what? I can't hear the cox. The noise from the grandstands was so unbelievably loud I could feel it, I couldn't just hear it, it was in every part of my body and I just knew that we were going to have to dig deeper with every single stroke and for me I was just hoping that the Germans weren't going as fast as us because I honestly didn't have a clue where they were. I couldn't hear Lily, all I could hear was the crowd and I really do feel that that crowd rode every stroke with us. It was almost as if they were in as much physical pain as we were but they wanted us to win so badly, you know, 99.99% of that crowd were shouting for GB. I know there were some Germans there because my friend was standing right behind them. Erm, and we came across the finish line. I didn't hear the buzzer, the finish line buzzer. The only reason I knew to stop rowing was that Dave, who was sat in front of me, collapsed backwards onto my feet so I thought we must've finished but I didn't know where we'd come. And so I then collapsed backwards onto Pam's feet sat behind me and I said: "where did we come?" and then the words that I'd dreamt of hearing since I knew that the Paralympics were going to be in London which was "we've won" from Pam. And I just started crying. It was just relief that we'd actually done it. That race was almost, there was almost desperation: we knew that there wasn't much we could do we just had to put everything we could possibly conjure up from the depths, we had to put everything in, and just hope that we were going to be faster than the Germans and we were.

And then we went to the media pontoon, did the media interviews and I tried not to cry. And then when we got onto the medal pontoon I actually started to enjoy it and hearing your national anthem with those medals round your neck is just brilliant, absolutely fantastic. It's not something that's ever going to be able to be repeated – absolutely incredible experience.

NY: So it's interesting – you know I was saying to you before, like, looking at the pictures in all

the different papers and just seeing the amount of joy and exhaustion and surprise actually in some of the pictures

NR: Yes

NY: Yeah, just all of that energy and emotion, like – what was that like really?

NR: [Breathes loudly] I was writing a blog the other day and I said: “2012 is well and truly over now and it’s been an incredible year but if somebody said to me would you do it again I don’t know that I would.” It was incredible, it was spectacular it was wonderful, it was exciting – it was all of those amazing feelings but it was also terrifying, nerve-wracking, stressful and very draining so for that high would I do it again? I’ve done it once [laughs] and I think once is enough because as I said you’re never going to be able to repeat something like that. Even if I go to Rio, getting a gold medal in Rio is going to be very different from getting a gold medal in your home country.

NY: [Accidentally interrupts verbally]... Yes, would you do it again?

NR: I don’t know it’s a tricky one. *It was spectacular, it was amazing, it was all of those positive emotions that you could possibly imagine; but it was also stressful, draining, nerve-wracking, terrifying and quite a lot of negative, you know, emotions as well.* I am never going to be able to recreate that; no one is ever going to be able to recreate that. Winning a gold medal at your home Games is something that very few people get the opportunity to do that in their lifetime. So if I go to Rio and win another gold medal then it’s going to feel very different. Keeping hold of that title will be incredible – it will be in Rio, which is going to be so cool and I’ll have been doing this for thirteen-odd years or something by then which is just slightly mad [laughs]. That will be like a lot of my life. Yeah, the idea of doing it again is wonderful but I don’t know whether I would do the whole London thing again.

NY: And you mentioned, like, the madness after you won. Could you talk a bit more about what was that like the media stuff...?

NR: [Laughs] God it was insane

NY: ...and people responding to you?

NR: It was completely insane. We went from Dorney Lake to Eton Excelsior Boat Club and we did, we spent half an hour with friends and family at Dorney talking to our friends and family. Erm, went and did two media interviews at Eton Excelsior, got on the minibus, went down to Stratford sat on the sofa, did the whole sofa thing. Came back, saw friends and family at the pub from about nine thirty to about eleven thirty. Went back to the village – our village in Egham, which was nearer to Dorney so it was easier for them to, you know, transport us backwards and forward so we had our own little village, which was quite cool. Pack all our stuff, got into bed at two, got up at four, left for Stratford at quarter past five. We were in on Daybreak at about half past six in the morning. We then went from that TV studio to a couple of other TV studios and then went from there – we were put in a room for BBC radio where they sent all the radio stations for our various, you know, Radio Berkshire, Radio Wherever for everyone in my crew. And they kept going to M&S and buying us food and bringing us food in and we didn’t move out of this radio studio for a good sort of four or five hours. And then we

went back finally to the main village in Stratford and settled in there for a couple of hours, then got changed, ready and went over across London to go on The One Show [laughs] to then come home to then go out to have a drink.

So the first, sort of, thirty-six hours were just non-stop and it was the most incredible, incredible experience, it really was. We were one of the really interesting stories of the Games simply because there were five of us. A mixture of boys and girls, a mixture of disabilities and one non-disabled person because our cox Lily isn't disabled so it was quite an interesting concoction for the media to look at and we all interview sort of all right as well so they quite liked us which was really cool.

NY: And after those thirty-six hours how has it been since – has it had moments of intensity?

NR: Yes, yeah it has. [When I came home, actually, I then decided to go shopping, which was probably not wise. I went into my local Sainsbury's and I couldn't get out of there for about an hour and a half. It was absolute mayhem. I got asked – the first question when I came off the water was: "where do you want your postbox?" and my immediate answer was: "Marlow High Street the big fat one outside Sainsbury's please, that's the one I want". And that was painted the next day by 10am so everybody was like: "Oh my God, we've got a postbox". And then when I came home I honestly couldn't go anywhere quickly, I was being stopped all the time. I don't think I could live like that but for a short amount of time it was really, really exciting.](#)

NY: And how is it now – like where are you now?

NR: It's settled down. I'm back in training, I'm aching, I'm tired – I'm pushing the boundaries, I'm just trying to improve myself as an athlete now because I know I was good when I got to London but I know I could be so much better. So I am just interested in how much better I can be.

NY: Which sort of fits neatly with the next set of things I want to ask you about which are really about – well we talked a bit about it when I arrived about the role of coaches and coaching in sort of sharpening and affecting you, particularly given – I know you talked before you spoke about the car accident – so maybe if you pretend you hadn't said that to me and say as feels right for you.

NR: So, I've experienced quite a lot of interesting different coaches and coxes over the years. The cox for our crew is very important because we are visually impaired they are our cue to stay in time with the others and what we can't see the others doing the cox can let us know. So they are, sort of, quite important. But then the coach as well – you can get very different styles of coaches. [I had one coach who was very hard on the athletes. I had a car accident, I was run over by a car in 2004 and I suffered quite a serious brain injury and which left me very emotionally all over the place for quite a few years and I didn't respond very well to the coach who was quite hard. But he wasn't aware that I'd had a brain injury and I think it got to the point where I went: "you know what, I'm just gonna prove you wrong, you know, I'm gonna be hard, I'm gonna to be tough." And I think that made me recover a lot quicker than it would have done, if, if he hadn't been so hard on me. When I did say to him, you know, "I feel that I am much better in myself. I feel that the brain injury, I am kind of recovered from that now" he said "What brain injury?" "Oh dear" so he wasn't aware of what I was going through and he said: "to](#)

be honest, if I'd have known I would have been very different with you". And I said: "I'm gonna be honest with you, I think that because you were the way you were with me I recovered quicker." So, and I've had to, I've had to learn, as I said I grew wanting to be an artist – I've had to learn to be an athlete, I've had to learn to be hard around the edges, I've had to learn not to let my emotions show. I've had to learn, all these things, I've not only had to train my body to be a rower, I've had to train my mind to act like an athlete because it didn't come naturally to me.

And the cox, you know, through the years, various different coxing styles as well and all of them have been fantastic. I'm still friends with every single cox we've ever had which is really nice. And they can bring so much to a crew especially, as I said, as we have got different disabilities and a mixture of boys and girls. So the boys have to cope with the girls and how they deal with stuff – certain times of the month and how they deal with stress and blah blah blah and the girls also have to deal with boys who can be very macho, very kind of aggressive but you learn to work together. And I think the cox in our case is brilliant and is that sort of, the glue, which holds us all together in the right places. I think for London we were very, very lucky. Mary, our coach, she takes an interest in not only the athlete and the scores but how the athlete learns and how she can get the best out of the athlete as an individual as well as how we're going to work as a crew. And Lily, our cox, is crazy but she has got such a great imagination. She can feel things going on on the boat – I don't know how she feels them, she's absolutely got a sixth sense to what's going on – so I think we had the best possible combination of cox and coach for the 2012 Games.

NY: So what would you say the Paralympics mean to you now?

NR: Erm. I think – that's a really hard one – I sort of [pause] [it is the pinnacle of Paralympic sport is being able to go to the Games and achieve what you want to achieve at the home Games it's never going to be bettered by anything else. And I think to me now, especially after London, it means that we are considered – from the feeling I get – we are considered much more on an even keel with the Olympic athletes than we ever have been before and I think London really took that on board on their challenge. It wasn't just to produce the best Games ever it was change the mindset of everyone watching the Games and I really do think they have done that. Before it was "disabled people who do sport"; now it's "elite athletes who have disabilities" – it's just changed it around completely.](#)

NY: So. I mean, it may not be as simple as this but I would like to give you an opportunity to say something as a message to young people who may or may not be interested in athletes and who have disabilities or who have different abilities. What would your message be to them to inspire them?

NR: I think one of the things I have learnt over the years is that my disability isn't actually the problem, if that makes sense. And I think, you know, we had four people in our boat all with very different disabilities, all achieving exactly the same thing. And it's not a case of seeing your disability or your lack of confidence or you're not as tall as the next person – it's not seeing that as a problem, it's seeing what you can do to better yourself sort of, instead of it, as well as [interruption]

NY: Good to go.

NR: When I was younger there was a lady who worked in Harrow, which is where I grew up, and she said that she's realized disabled people need to be treated differently but only so that they can achieve the same things and I think that is true whatever your 'problem' – if you want to call it that – or your feature if you want to call it that. So whether it is that you are short, or whether it is you lack in confidence, or whether your coordination's rubbish, whether you're missing half a leg, whether you cannot see very well. It's using what's around you to adapt what you are doing so you can achieve the same thing. So if there is something you really want to do and you are really inspired by doing then just keep hacking away at it, keep trying, keep sort of figuring out all the other ways you can do the same thing and don't ever be put off by somebody going: "oh you can't do it because". Unless it's something like, oh I don't know something silly like you can't swim underwater for twenty minutes because that's not physically possible. Well obviously there's no point in keeping to try to do that but, you know, you've got to play to your strengths and see other ways of doing the same thing as everybody else.

NY: And in your experience have you had times where you have felt or you've really known that you were being discriminated against because...

NR: Mainly at school...

NY: ...of your disability?

NR: I did feel that I got a pretty rough time because of my eyesight at school. But I wasn't a fighter back then, I would sit down and take it rather than fighting back and I think, you know, I have kinda learnt, I've learnt the attitude of take it, think about it, assess it, don't react [interruption]. So at school I did feel that my eyesight was a problem and it did set me apart from everybody else and back then I didn't have a kind of meet-it-head-on attitude I had a kind of sit-back-and-try-and-disappear-into-the-background, try not to exist. Erm, but now with sport it has really helped turn that that around. It's made me realize what I can do rather than what I can't do which is what everybody at school told me is what you can't do, you know, this over and over again: "you can't do that, you can't do this". Whereas now it's: "OK you can do this, you can do this and you can do this so let's do it" and that's the difference that sport has actually taught me, brought me out of my shell and made me realize that, you know, I've just got to do something if I believe I can do it and not believe the person who says you can't, believe the person who says you can.

NY: And obviously given your achievements – which have been recognized in lots of different ways and I guess in a very public way through the MBE – so I thought you might want to just talk through how that happened for you and what that felt like.

NR: I got a letter through the post, erm, and it said about getting the MBE and it said you can't tell anybody and I just wanted to tell everybody but I had to wait for it to come out on the New Year's Honours List on the 29th December which was really exciting. So I'm going to the palace on the 20th February to get the MBE presented. I don't know how they do it really but I'm sure we will get told. Something about the ballroom and you take three steps forward and courtesy at the queen – there's all this – I'm going to get it wrong, I'm going to be the one that fluffs it up, I know it. So that's really, really exciting and it's so public, it's so out there for everyone to

see but it's not something that I've achieved, if that makes sense. I achieved the gold medal by racing and then got the post box off the back of that but the MBE is something that has been recognized by a higher authority as something that I deserve which is just such a treat, it is so exciting.

NY: And where do you, kind of, what are your hopes – looking forward you have spoken a bit about Rio but are you, kind of, wanting from the next few years and looking forward to Rio?

NR: To keep GB as the top rowing nation in the coxed four in my boat, to be part of that every year would be absolutely phenomenal and to go to Rio and have the opportunity to, you know, hold that title again would just be – I cannot even put words to it – but more than anything I just want to make myself a better athlete, push my boundaries, see where I can go as an individual. And then getting in the boat along the way to go the World Championships would be really cool as well.

NY: And I've got a couple of questions: I was reading various articles about you and in one of them it said your nickname was "Norm" – is that true...

NR: Yes, yes it is

NY: ... is there a story behind that?

NR: Oh, only because somebody misheard somebody else and then somebody... My coach said "ah, call me Naomi" and she said "I can't be bothered to say Naomi there's too many syllables" and then someone said "does anyone ever call you Nome" and then the other person said "why would anyone call her Norm?" and then he carried on calling me Norm and it's just developed. So my physio calls me "Normative Data" which is interesting, erm, one of the other guys calls me "Normaniser" which is also interesting and then there's "Norman" and "Normie" and "Normster" and [sighs]. It's not good! [laughs] [inaudible]

NY: And the second question I had, just out of curiosity really, is where's your artist gone, because obviously you did the degree?

NR: Oh, it's still there it's still there, definitely still there. I'm still making jewellery at home in my spare time. I've got sketchbooks on the go. I'm trying to design myself a tattoo at the moment but that's not going very well. I want to somehow involve the Paralympic symbol in sort of, yeah, I don't really know, but I'm working on it.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]