

Conversation with Paul Cartwright, March 2011

All my life I have been brought up to believe I am not different. My parents deliberately brought me up to be as able-bodied as possible. I originally went to a 'special school' and then was moved to an ordinary school and all my mates there were all able-bodied; I wasn't interested in being labelled a disabled kid. I used to play football with my mates. Of course I say 'play' football; I was always the goalie in my wheelchair. I really used to get riled when people would say things like, 'You can't do that; you shouldn't do that'. It just made me want to go out and prove them wrong. I wanted to be treated for what I am, for what I can do and to be judged by my abilities rather than my disability. In those days people did tend to judge a book by its cover. I first got into sport in about 1978. I tried a bit of everything but then discovered that I really enjoyed wheelchair racing. I began with a local disabled sports club and things started from there. Sport was like someone opening a door for me; it became my life.

In wheelchair racing there were six classifications: 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4 and 5, and the higher the number the less disabled you were. So a 1a or 1b would be quite tetraplegic; typically they would have no abdominal muscles and no balance. They might have to be strapped onto the chair and would be unable to grip with their hands, so instead of holding the wheels they would be using their hands flat to push the wheels around. At the other extreme a 5 would probably be able to walk without an aid, perhaps just with a limp. I was a 4 with some elements of a 5, but I was classified as a 4.

There is a lot more at stake these days in terms of the opportunities than there were in my day. There is sponsorship for the best athletes, grants for training and travel.

I competed in my first international event in 1981; and then I really started concentrating on my training for wheelchair racing. Back then, in 1984, you had to find the money and the sponsorship yourself. I went round to the local Lions and Rotary clubs and got them to do fund raising events; and I did a sponsored 9 mile wheelchair push in an old Everest and Jennings chair to raise money for my new sports wheelchair. Of course there was still a lot of prejudice back then, particularly in the press. I never got reported on the sports pages; I was always on the 'Didn't he do well!' pages in the newspapers, with headlines like 'Brave Paul does it again.' At least that has mostly changed now.

One of the main reasons Britain lagged behind in wheelchair racing was the quality of the equipment. Britain had never won a wheelchair racing event at an international games, this made me realise the importance of equipment when I got into the England squad, having previously been top dog in my local club, and there was other athletes, with a decent sports chair and of course they were faster than me.

The development of sports wheelchairs in the UK had not been good; when I started there were still a lot of athletes competing in ordinary wheelchairs – heavy frame, thick tyres, one-size-fits-all - they simply didn't have the equipment to succeed. My first chair was an Everest and Jennings which wasn't great, but at least it had 24" wheels compared to most chairs with 22" wheels, so that gave me a bit of an advantage with more top end speed because of that larger diameter. In wheel chair racing every little thing like that counts. At the time locally I had this reputation as the 'chief destroyer of wheelchairs'; that was what the local Wheelchair Services said when they wrote to me threatening to withdraw any new wheelchairs from me because I was so active and was getting through so many. At the time I could wreck a chair after three month's use.

Then I got a Hoffmeister German sports wheel chair. It was a bit of a half-way house design. It was a standard frame size but you could sort of adapt it to your own spec. It came with a really long frame, so I had to get a friend of mine to cut it down and re-weld it for me so it fitted. But by the time I got the Hoffmeister it was already old technology. European and North American athletes had been using it back in the late 1970's and early 1980's, but sports wheelchair designs were changing fast. I used to take photographs of other European athletes' racing wheelchairs when I was at International competitions in the early 1980s. Compared with what we were using in Britain at the time these were fantastically light and stripped-down bespoke machines. I used these photos as the basis for designing my own chair with Bromakin. The chair with the black tubing was used by Bo Lindqvist, the Swedish athlete who also ran the Swede wheelchair company. So for 1984 I had the Loughborough firm, Bromakin Wheelchairs design me a light-weight sports chair. I am a big, broad guy and I wanted something to try and cut down on my wind resistance, so I asked them to come up with a tapered front end. And mine was the first wheel chair to have an 11 mm racing tyre, this was the thinnest at the time.

The 1982 photo of me in the sweat shirt is a training photo at Spenborough athletics track; the bearded chap racing behind me is Peter Caruthers, the MD of Bromakin Wheelchairs. I am racing in my first Bromakin prototype chair; and you can see by the way it's doing wheelies that this one was still slightly too short for me; my centre of gravity was too far back, plus I was a very top-heavy bloke, causing the lifting at the front. An alteration was made to the footrest extension, out of copper pipe that brought my feet about nine inches forward and corrected the centre of gravity; this allowed me to get the power onto track.

I had made a point of joining an able-bodied athletics club, at Spenborough, West Yorkshire to train. The reason for this was that I had already realised, I needed some athletic coaching on a full time basis - rather than just at squad training weekends, every 6 weeks. That was why I wanted to join an able-bodied club: to get access to the professional coaching. Of course it wasn't that easy in 1981, because no one had ever considered taking on a disabled athlete, in fact prior to joining the athletics club, I had initially been refused access to the club, because of fears that my wheelchair would damage the track. But because I had a few friends in high places within the local leisure services department and they were able to overturn this decision by the track management and I joined the club.

My training regime was tough. When I was working I would get up at 6.00 a.m., do five miles on roads, then do two hours training down the track before going to work at midday; I finished at 9.00 at night and in summer if it was still light I would do another 5 mile road run. When I was on the early shift I would go down the track after work and train from 6.00 until 9.00 of an evening. Tuesdays and Saturdays I was down the gym and most Sundays I was down the track in the mornings and out on the road in the afternoons.

When I was selected for the British Olympic team in 1984 I had put four years of my life into this. I was 19, just turning 20. A lot of the British squad came from Yorkshire. Perhaps this was something to do with the presence of Roger Ellis who was both the squad field coach and was also Senior Physio at the Pinderfield's Hospital in Wakefield, the regional spinal injuries centre which many of the team had passed through. Then when we all heard that we weren't going to Illinois it was simply

the most devastating thing that had ever happened to me in my life. We all thought nothing was going to happen. It was just heart-breaking.

But then the games moved to Stoke Mandeville at the last minute. I'd been selected to do a job and as it turned out it couldn't have been a better place: to be selected to represent your country at anything, is a great honour, but to compete for your own country in front of your home crowd, at such an important event, as the Paralympics is absolutely unbelievable and emotional. I qualified for the 100 metres final; I didn't win, I came 5th; but it was just such a fantastic experience. Twenty six years later I still get very emotional just thinking about it. To be glorified in sport is just one of the greatest things that can happen to anyone.

I definitely remember that I only competed against white South Africans in my heats in 1984 ; there was this sense that the Black athletes were there but were at the back, left behind. I do remember the lead up to the boycott when the whole S Africa team was expelled. We mainly noticed it in terms of the heightened security and the threats to kill athletes or bomb the place – apparently from both sides - from those seeking to exclude South Africa and from those who wanted the team to participate. There were all sorts of silly restrictions on the team members; we couldn't go to certain places, weren't allowed to go into Aylesbury on our own. Of course I was only 19 going on 20 on the time; I had come to do a job and it was rather uncomfortable - all seemed a huge distraction and from the main purpose of the games. It was sad to see their team expelled but then you could say that if it hadn't happened then South Africa wouldn't be where it is today.

The development of sports chairs for the Paralympics that took off in the 1980s has trickled down and hugely improved every day wheelchair design. Back in the early 80s chairs were seen as purely an implement of necessity to get you from A to B – and they came in three colours – silver, grey or blue. They were heavy and came as one-size-fits-all. Nowadays there is much more of a sense of ergonomics and design for everyday chairs. Lighter weight metals and materials, bespoke sizing or adjustable frames, better quality wheel design with less spokes and better bearings: all these changes have come about out of sports chair design for the Paralympics. Spoke guards were first developed for wheelchair basketball; because it was such a hard contact game you needed something to protect the wheels. Nowadays people have personalised spoke guards on their chairs with colours and patterns and their own designs. You could even say that chairs now have something of the 'fashion accessory' about them. They come in every conceivable colour of the rainbow - and people even get personal paint jobs to match their interests or favourite football teams. When I go down to watch Leeds United play there are other lads down there with their chairs in the Leeds colours.