

## **Interview with Peter Norfolk at work, 26 June 2013**

**Jon Newman interviewer**

### **Was sport an important part of your life before your accident?**

Absolutely, sport was very important to me when I was at school and growing up. When I was growing up I was playing football all the time; then I went to a different school and it was rugby, cricket and all sorts – and I played tennis as well, but particularly squash... so yeah, very important to me. I think it's the foundation of what we do, it helps integration and socialisation and everything. I think whether you're disabled or not it should be part of everyone's life.

### **You had your accident in your late teens?**

Yeah, I was 19 when I had my accident, Boxing Day 79. I think everyone remembers their accident, you know the time, date, etc., the pain...

### **Was it Stoke Mandeville Hospital that you went to?**

Yes, I was very fortunate. Within a very short period of time I was moved to Stoke Mandeville. I came off a motorbike and I had quite a few serious problems and I was very lucky being transferred and spent quite a few months there to start off a new life.

### **Was sport as rehabilitation an important part of the regime that you went through at Stoke?**

Well I think Stoke has that philosophy running through it... not necessarily sport but activities. As soon as you can get out of bed and you're relatively mobile, the physios and everyone, there's almost an expectation that yeah, you've got to get out and start doing table tennis, archery, basket ball, whatever it happens to be, hydrotherapy...

### **What were the first sport activities, presumably you weren't doing tennis then?**

Well there wasn't really tennis. I think Stoke had a tennis court, next to the mortuary [smiles] which was quite an interesting place for it to be. Well I played table tennis because when I came out I actually joined a local table tennis league; archery, I got into archery as well (I've still got all my equipment and I keep looking at it - one day I'll get it out); and I took up basket ball too.

### **Were you playing any of these at club level or a serious level?**

I did all of them at club level I played basketball – I can't say I was particularly good – but I think the main thrust of that is I'm an individual player and as soon as you play in a team and if you lose... I found it quite difficult to try and change or affect the way things were going, so as an individual – and particularly in an individual sport like tennis – you're the master of your own destiny at the end of the day.

### **One of the big things in the sporting calendar at Stoke Mandeville is the National Games...**

The Stoke games! The Stoke games have a long and colourful history, fond memories for me too; I went to the Stoke games in the beginning. I think in the beginning as well there were much more... it was very much a case of learning, and I think with my tennis career as well in the beginning the point

of going to tournaments – we travelled the world and went to tournaments – you learn, because you meet lots of different people who all have different experiences, they do things differently, and that’s how you learn. And there’s a camaraderie and there’s a comradeship... and the more professional sport becomes, you actually lose that, you lose... there’s still competitiveness on the court or on the field, but then everyone goes to the bar and you talk about... you talk about life and as I say, that’s how you learn.

**That’s interesting because that chimes with what a lot of older athletes who went through the Stoke Games have said, that perhaps something has been lost. On one level the Paralympics are wonderful, but it has changed as well.**

I think it’s definitely been lost. I think tennis is a prime example. Tennis is a fully integrated professional sport. As much as I think that’s wonderful – and it is the way forward because we have no choice: we can bring on the youngsters and we can show them and if they’re good enough we can give them a career. However, because we are losing our older athletes and we are losing their experience and their talents, the youngsters aren’t actually able to learn, so they’re becoming harder to deal with, and I think they’re not learning life’s problems and issues – you know, living with a disability is... different, and you have to view things differently, I think it’s a little sad. It’s a two-edged sword.

**So for ten years before you discovered wheelchair tennis your main sports were?**

Table tennis which I played in a local league in Guilford and Woking; I played basketball as well, and I played in Sussex and enjoyed some success. I enjoyed playing basketball. At the end of the day I played sport. I tried archery and we did field shooting and all sorts of things. I think it was a case of... I did swimming, I tried water skiing, I went scuba diving... I tried lots and lots of things, but it wasn’t until I actually saw tennis being played and I realised that tennis could be played - that was my “light bulb” moment for me. Also that was around the same time I started EPT; there was lots of synergy going on at the same time and it was the change of my life. Because when I came out of hospital I basically went back to work, or I went and got a job, which I’m glad I did, but I also found out I didn’t like being told what to do (which doesn’t make a good sportsman either). You know, in those days, we’re talking, what, twenty five years ago – everything was... it wasn’t easy, it was harder in fact, we were still breaking down barriers, doing all sorts, but finding tennis was probably one of the best things and starting my business was one of the best things.

**Wheelchair tennis was still a very new sport in 1990?**

I just saw a demonstration sport at Stoke Mandeville; I think we had six players. Jayant was one of our founders, Jayant Mistry, and obviously went on to be a fantastic tennis player. We didn’t have many but we had lots of enthusiastic people who wanted to increase it, improve it, bring it out to the wider public and, to be fair, we’re still doing that. I still meet people who don’t realise that you can play wheelchair tennis. You know, what’s so difficult, tennis court, tennis racquet and a tennis ball; whether you’re standing up or sitting down, it’s the same game.

**I am struck by the fact that tennis is still a recent sport, but secondly there is this enormous professional circuit.**

It's probably the only wheelchair sport that has the full professional circuit. So, there's a tournament every week of the year, the circuit's worth over a million and a half dollars; for us to get youngsters in it's a fantastic thing to do you know it's a job. I think that's its dichotomy: it's either a job and you lose the social aspect (or the social aspect is very little) whereas 20 years ago or even 15 years ago, ten years maybe there was still the social aspect and it was still about learning about living with disability, who does what, how do you do it, how do you get in the car, what chair do you use, how does using certain products make your life easier? Now it is about tennis.

**Is it peculiar to tennis, or do you think other sports are emulating tennis?**

I think so, no the other sports are similar but because they're team sports, most of them, there is more camaraderie, more fun let's say. Tennis is a bit more isolating; and also we're out on the world circuit so we are not here, we are not as integrated with the other sports. It's a pretty lonely and selfish life actually. It's one of the reasons that I'm stopping my competitive career because I've got a young family now. My little boy actually said a couple of times; he didn't like me playing tennis. "Why not? We have a great time we play, he plays? It's because he associates it with me going away; every couple of weeks I'm going away somewhere. So, I had to make a decision as well.

**Given that there is this extraordinary professional structure around the game – Wimbledon, the Australian Open, all those other big name tournaments - how did Athens and Beijing feel in comparison with the existing circuit. What was the difference?**

The difference is the crowds and the atmosphere and the infrastructure of the Paralympics; you're also mixed in with all the other athletes which you just don't get on a daily or even a yearly basis. It's only once every four years that you're in a camp... I suppose the best way to explain it is on a weekly basis when you are doing your tournaments we go to a tournament somewhere, we stay in a hotel, we play in the tournament; apart from the other players in that tournament or on the circuit, you don't see any of the other athletes, you don't see any administration officers or organisers or in the Paralympic Association or anything like that. And the once every four years you are expected to slot into place in the bigger hole – and it is actually quite difficult, because you'd spent the last three years running, organising, playing, winning your own life with your coach. And then suddenly your taken out of your comfort zone and put into... you know you're just a very small cog in a very big wheel... and expected to deliver.

Athens was exciting – you now there was always the worry about it being built on time – the crowds were good; I think it was OK. I mean it was my first Paralympics; obviously I've got great memories winning a gold and a silver. I think the difference between that and Beijing, Beijing was way more spectacular, way bigger, much more media; and I think the progression from Athens to Beijing, even the four years leading up to Beijing, there was much more media anyway, there was more awareness, people wanted to know more. I also got recognised more because I'd won Britain's first ever tennis gold medal. So it started to get a bit harder, there started to be a bit more pressure. When I watched the Beijing Olympics on the telly and saw the absolute spectacle of the opening ceremony and all of that, it was like "Wow!" And then they did the same with the Paralympics. I'd been into Beijing and done a reccy and walked around Beijing itself and even then the general public were still unused to people in wheelchairs – white people in wheel chairs. It was an exciting time, a very exciting time; and of course for me Beijing, to repeat what I did in Athens was a wonderful achievement which I'm really proud of.

**If you were asked to reflect on the greatest moment in your sporting career, would it be one of the Australian Opens or would it be one of the gold medals?**

I don't know, I was asked the other day... It's really difficult; the London Games, being asked to be flag bearer, which I was voted for by the other athletes - that was an honour. It was also the first opening ceremony that I'd actually been to. I didn't go to the other two because they impacted on my game. Coming into the stadium with a 100,000 people in your home games as flag, at the head of our athletes was an enormous achievement and I'm really proud to have been asked. Winning the first ever tennis gold medal, perhaps... But you know repeating the process in Beijing was also solidifying and confirming that it wasn't just a one-off. So, it's quite difficult to choose which is the best achievement; I don't know. I'm proud of all of them now I'm coming off my competitive stage; I'm proud of all of them.

**I'm aware of the importance of classification in all sports; it's a huge issue and in some sports there is an extraordinarily sophisticated and developed system, but in tennis it's quite simple isn't it?**

Possibly; there are three classifications; the classification system itself is not necessarily simple. But there's Men, Women and Quad. To play in the Men's division you just need a disability that means that you can't play competitive able-bodied tennis. So there are... and the same with Women... So it's a much more open category. In the beginning and even now the whole point was to open up the game of tennis to bring in as many disabilities as possible, and to open up the competition. Where we are now is that the level of the game is so high, there are people who are beginning to feel that it needs extra classification: a matter for debate. The Quad division which is the division which I play in is for people with three limbs or more affected; we can obviously still play at a very high standard. I think that tennis, it's going to be good or bad, for new people coming into tennis, if they see what the level is that's what they are going to have to aspire to; or they won't come in 'cos the level's too high. But you could say that for any other sport, especially able-bodied sport. If you look at Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic and Federer, they must have thought that they could compete otherwise they wouldn't have gone into it; well, we're going to have the same problem - and that can only be good. So Quad is for three limbs affected and it will be down to.... the more limited your disability within that category, obviously the better chance you have, as long as you have the ability to play too. It's not just disability; you still have to have the ability to play. And I think lots of people lose sight of the fact that good athletes, whatever the sport, it's not just the limiting disability or whatever, it's their ability. And I think for me it's all about focusing on the ability, not the disability.

**Certainly one of the messages of 2012 was that people were there to see sport, not just disabled people playing sport.**

I think London 2012 changed the focus of Paralympic sport totally. I was enthralled; it was the first time I've sat and actually watched a lot of the athletics, for example, the races. It was an unbelievable spectacle and it was far more interesting than watching the Olympics. There was different styles; how is it that they can run that fast with prosthetic legs? I just thought it was brilliant and everyone I've met on the street, it's opened up the abilities. I think there was a lot of things about programmes prior, talking about "The Superhumans". You know, we're not superhuman: we're dedicated, that's for sure; we're competitive; and we have a resilience to achieve and it is harder than for an able-bodied athlete; we have lots of other challenges to

overcome before we even get to the field of play. And for that everyone should be applauded. But what will change is the focus – and it is changing, it doesn't change overnight and it is changing – and the first change is that the majority of the population now know about the Paralympics.

**Going back to tennis; you talked earlier about a “light bulb” moment when you saw that demonstration at Stoke in 1990. Can you define the particular pleasures or satisfactions that you get from the game rather than other sports?**

I tried all the other sports and tennis became a release; it still is a release. It's a pleasure to be able to go onto a tennis court and play for fun or competitively against anyone, standing up or sitting down. When I first saw tennis, on the tennis court at Stoke next to the mortuary – which was a great place for it to be, on some days – and I came back home and I went to my local courts, an indoor court, and there was a guy there, coaching, my first coach, Lieutenant Colonel Christie, and I basically, when he finished his lesson, I went to see him and I said, “I want you to coach me for tennis.” And he looked at me, my chair and sort of went “Never done that before.” And I went, “It's tennis, you know” And he sort of said “Are you any good?” And I said, “Not yet, but I'm gonna be”. That's essentially how I started, and I went to see Roger; the beauty of Roger also was, having come out of the army – and he'd had some pretty amazing experiences – his internal philosophy was also “not give up”, so when I... we were training and we'd be doing certain things and I'd be going “I can't do that” and he'd go [shaking head] “That's not in my vocabulary. That doesn't compute”. So then it was, ok, my disability says that I can't do this. So he says well ok, let's find a way of seeing if we can make you do it. So it was quite good in the beginning to have Roger because he came from outside and didn't know anything about disability. He questioned everything; and I thought that was quite instrumental in how I started because it made me question - and it still does, I still question - so instead of going “Oh no, I just can't do that”. It's, “Oh, I might be able to if I did this”. And that's what the youngsters miss too because they then don't have the benefit of my experience or the older athletes' experience.

**Can you give an example of one of those ways you went round something and came up with a solution?**

In tennis when you hit a back hand you really need to turn into the court and not turn away; and it was a case of finding a way to turn into the court – because then you don't lose sight of the ball or the court – and keep the speed up. It is easier to turn out (sometimes it's faster) but you lose sight of the ball and the court. So we worked on certain things; and it's not easy by any means, even something as simple as that. That's the sort of thing you need a coach or whatever; someone to come in and start picking holes in things.

**So when you approached Roger in 1990, you were the first person in a wheelchair to approach him?**

Well, it was tennis; Roger coached tennis. What's the difference whether I'm sat down or standing up? I certainly had that approach then, and he did really. We just had slightly different challenges; I was slower, I couldn't move as much, I couldn't run as much and plus in those days my chair wasn't anywhere near as good as the chair I have now.. You know, technology's improved massively.

**How did you then progress to a semi-professional level?**

The circuit was just starting. There were obviously very few tournaments; and the National Wheelchair Tennis Association was just starting – and didn't have many members either – and it was all very much about finding places to play and finding other guys in wheelchairs to play with. Essentially it just progressed from there. We used to go into Fulham 'cos the courts were free and we played come wind, rain sunshine, snow whatever.

**It's a completely unmodified court?**

Yes, everything's the same; otherwise you'd never find a tennis court.

**Having spoken to athletes from various disciplines and anyone competing from the 70s through to the 80s, one of the things they always want to talk about is the great leap forward in sports wheelchairs.**

Yeah, technology's made a big difference. For me that was quite good because it was hand n hand with EPC; that was part of our expertise in tuning chairs, setting up and tuning chairs for sport, because it was a lot harder 20 years ago.

**So you started by customising standard chairs?**

Yeah, absolutely. For me I'd do whatever I could to my chair. It was like a Formula One car, I was always tinkering with it, looking at bearings or castors or camber or whatever, going down to the court and trying it out and then... There was two strands: I was improving my chair and I was also improving my performance, and as you get better and more ability and so you improve your chair again. And technology has moved on; there were some quite big leaps of technology: three-wheel tennis chairs came out – that was pretty astounding really – how can you play sport in a three wheel chair? Who even thought of that? But that was a big breakthrough because it revolutionised tennis and the speed and all sorts. And there's been lots of technological improvements, and with the balls, and with the racquets and the strings... and the awareness of standards is moving too, so it all goes hand in hand. From an EPC perspective, we used to go and do the repair tents and we were looking at tyres, tyre pressure, spokes, all sorts so, it was fun.

**Did EPC ever design chairs from scratch?**

No we never designed; we were always a retailer; but I had input, I was able to input into the major manufacturers that were doing those chairs – although in those days they weren't major manufacturers (apart from one) they were actually quite small manufacturers, most of them but they've been swallowed up now.

**Rainer Kueschall?**

Yes, he's been swallowed up. He still has an influence. I think the high-performance market is actually quite a small market and there aren't that many influential people in it, but the ones that are are influential in development of chairs in sport particularly – I think all of us have been involved in sport.

**Were you as a player sought out by wheelchair manufacturers for your views?**

Yes, absolutely, I was and still am given the opportunity to put my input in. Whether they want to take it is another point. It's very subjective; it's obviously only my opinion, so they have to take the wider... and this is about sales. I think what you also mustn't dismiss or lose the sight of, the wheelchair industry, even the high-performance section, it's not a charity; it is actually a business

### **Do you see the Paralympics as driver for changes to attitudes around disability?**

I think the Paralympics can. At the end of the day, for any wheelchair athletes to get to a Paralympics is the major achievement; it is the biggest achievement, particularly if they can win gold; it's the achievement that you will be remembered by. You know, I've won lots of other tournaments, 50-odd tournaments, grand slams (and in the world of tennis grand slams are obviously the most respected and regarded) but winning medals is actually what it's about for us for funding and all sorts of things. You win a medal and on that day you are the best in the world and you have a special memory with the medal itself. You know,, the memories are in the medal; every time you look at the medal those memories come back. It's a long road; it's every four years, it's not next week. And you only have one chance. You have one chance and that's it and if you blow it well that's it. And there are three medals, bronze, silver and gold. Three of you are going to get a medal out of – in tennis – a draw of 64, or whatever it happens to be; so it's not easy and the general public don't understand how hard it is to do that, so when you achieve that a lot of it is about relief: your four year road, you've succeeded. But it's also not just about yourself. For me i had a fantastic team and it doesn't work without the team. It's a very selfish road too, so they also have to have the same goal, and the goal is to win, at all cost at the end of the day.

Stoke has evolved over the years; it has also become more professional, you've got WheelPower there now, the facilities have improved, the hospital is better, the medical awareness is better as well; and we know that we can get people out and into sport and we know that sport actually makes a big difference to the well being of anyone who's had an accident. Stoke Mandeville's talking about the pinnacle of athletes at the end of the day; we are now seeing lots of the army guys coming back from the war, some with major disabilities; however they are feeding into sport. I think with the Paralympics everyone is now looking at sport as - it always was rehabilitation - but now its rehabilitation and its competitive and can earn a living from it; and I think that's the biggest sea change, it's earning a living. So it has to be more professional and although I'm a little sad we're going to lose the camaraderie and all of that, I think I'm quite pleased that we're professional because that will then be put back into the infrastructure of Stoke Mandeville, WheelPower and other places. And we need to push that out to the world.