

Interview with Robin Surgeoner

Interviewer Klara Janicki, April 2013

What brought you to sport?

Oh, sport for me is something that I have done from a child, I mean I started swimming through hydrotherapy, as a three year-old, and I could actually swim before I could walk, and kind of never really left swimming, even right through to now, swimming is still a huge part of my weekly life, obviously not competitively anymore – I do the odd thing, but mostly I am encouraging my children to swim and just keeping fit so I suppose the origin of it is through having a disability.

So being a therapy...

Yes, sorry so hydrotherapy was the introduction to swimming, but I turned out to be quite a natural, because when I was about four, and I can still remember that I did 20 lengths of hydro-pool, and the physio bought me a great big toy truck.

So how did it feel in the pool for you, difficult, stimulating or what does swimming bring you?

The reason I love swimming is actually, is probably [because] water is the place where I feel most comfortable, probably helped by the fact that I am a good swimmer, I am not really sure which is which, you know, whether it is because I am a good swimmer that I love water, or I became a good swimmer because water gives me so much freedom, but actually I can just get into the swimming pool and sink to the bottom and simply enjoy being immersed in water, the weight taken out of the bones I guess you know it gives you that lift.

When did you decide that you wanted to do it seriously?

Because I swam from such an early age I guess I've always enjoyed swimming. I always enjoyed challenges for myself and then actually as a child we went to live in Hong-Kong. We joined a sort of recreation club, which had these huge outdoor pools, which obviously with the weather in Hong-Kong is quite nice. And whenever there was a gala, you know, the kids races, I just wanted to swim them, and certainly at that early age - at 7, 8, 9, I was as fast as any of the able-bodied kids. Obviously as you get older things change, and children who go into to competitive swimming in a non-disabled arena then the differences show, but because... I think I'm lucky, I was a naturally gifted swimmer, my

body position is... I mean other people have always said, you've got such a fantastic body line, and it's not anything I have ever had to think about, you know I had to learn the strokes properly, the techniques, you know, the various bits that make you to go faster, but actually you know, if there is such a thing as a natural human swimmer, then I was one of them, and from there I mean from just doing that - and I always swam at schools galas. Then we moved back to England which would have been 1974, I went to a senior school, there was a club, I think, my parents found a local club, that was relatively new called the Rushmore Mallards (they're quite an important part of disability sport history as a club, and a lot of Paralympians across the sports have come from the Rushmore Mallards. But when I started going there at that point, they were only a swimming club. I just enjoyed the swimming, I just loved going all the time. They found out that there were junior competitions, there used to be - and I am sure there still is - a really good network of disability sport clubs and my dad and the club organized things those days, but no, when I think it was 1975, it could have been 1976, that I went to Stoke-Mandeville for the National Junior championship for the first time and did really quite well. I suppose if there was a launch point in to what was then the rest of my career, it was going to Stoke and winning just from having been a good swimmer. And from then quite soon you got picked up to go to junior camps, and development camps and then the rest is a lot of hard work.

What was the beginning like; what was your daily routine, weekly routine, how much time did you devote to sport?

Oooh, I mean in those days I probably swam, from an early age, particularly when we lived in Hong-Kong, we swam six, seven days a week, because it was just what you did. We went to school started at 8.00, finished at 1.00 and then you went to beach and you spent four hours swimming at the beach. Before I started competitive swimming I'd done so much swimming already just naturally as part of what we did. From then I used to swim on average three times a week as a teenager anyway, and then at early teens thirteen, fourteen, fifteen you know, going to school and I also liked fishing so there was a balance of things. And then probably when I hit sixteen and actually when I started work full-time then I started training a lot more and that was when I used to train before work and train after work - and go to work, and compete every other weekend and then go to all the training camps, which I probably did from the age of sixteen through until, until when I retired really after 1992.

You mentioned this important competition at Stoke Mandeville, do you have a vivid memory of it?

My memories of Stoke Mandeville go back so far because the very first time I went there was for the juniors. I remember there was this hut behind the swimming pool that was next to the railway track and there were beds that sunk like that when you got in them [gestures with hands] they were like this wire army cot thing, and all night goods trains went zooming by as well, so I remember my first national competition almost not having any sleep and wondering if I was going to be able to swim at all and then in the morning I actually did quite well. But that hut closed quite quickly and Stoke Mandeville started to develop, so I remember it from being not much more than a big sports hall and a snooker room and a swimming pool, to it progressing to having the Paralympic village which they built for the games in 1984, to now where the stadium. I mean, I think the swimming pool - the tank of the pool - is the same, and everything else apart from the sports hall space has kind of now changed over the years, you know, being developed and modernized and knocked down and rebuilt to now. I mean it is still a fantastic sport centre and a place I have so many fantastic memories of, of which the competition in some way is only a small part you know: the camaraderie, the girlfriends, the sneaking to the bar, all the things that teenagers do, you know, we did and we did very well.

What was the importance of sport in your life in overcoming disability?

For me sport has always been a really important part of my life; I come from a sporting family, my dad ran and boxed for the army, my sisters ran, my sisters swam, my mum played tennis, my dad played tennis, my mum who is (kill me) seventy five, I think (she will be cross in a minute if she sees this) still swims competitively as a master. They both played golf up until probably two years ago, my dad is eighty three - so I come from a sporting family. I suppose what happened was that my dad recognized - I mean my dad fought for me to go to a mainstream school, so when I started school in 1968 disabled kids didn't go to mainstream schools. My dad was like, "He is the same as his sisters; he just walks differently, take him". He had to argue, but they did. And then the story goes, I was on like probation as a five year-old, for having done nothing wrong but walked differently; and then the head master came into the hall a few weeks after I had started and panicked because he couldn't find me and wanted to know where I was; and I was hanging from the roof, from the rope, because there was a PE lesson and everybody climbs a rope so that's what you do, when you've got arms like this, you don't necessarily need legs and sort of from there... So I guess I never had to overcome my disability because I see myself as, I am, a Disabled Person who faces challenges but those challenges are often the things that are presented to me rather than my impairment in itself. My impairment just means that I

am crap at walking, so I use a wheelchair. So the things that make a difference and the things that sport has really made is to challenge other people's opinions and impressions of who you are. So even now as an adult I can go down the street in my wheelchair and people will just look at you as if you are nobody. You know that may be harsh thinking post-Paralympic legacy, but it's true. You know, when you live as a Disabled Person and experience the everyday man in the street, then some of the things people will do, the attitudes that people will have, people parking in designated parking spaces ... people think because you are a Disabled Person that what you get, like for example a disabled parking bay, is some sort of extra privilege that they are missing out on. So sport is very much kind of multifaceted thing for me. It gave me competition, which actually is why I started swimming, but what it also did was show, well I can be as good as anybody else at what I do, and what's changed is the recognition of what you do, it is the impact. So sport is the vehicle for change, people recognizing whether it's me, whether it's David Weir, whether it's Tanni Gray, or whether it's any other up-and-coming young disabled sportsperson; it is about saying but they are doing sport and seeing sport instead of seeing, "Ooh, isn't he doing well! Shame he can't use his legs". So I am hoping that's giving a kind of reflection on how I think the disability or how sport has changed. So to reiterate – water gives me freedom, and that freedom in water has given me something, which is competitive swimming, which I would not change for anything. And that and the competitive swimming and going out and seeing the world and getting a whole kind of geographic, social and political education with it kind of opened me up, to now being in a position that I am where I am able to say, "Hold on, I don't need to change; I need to change how people or the situation affects me".

How important for you was success in sport?

I think that to all people winning is what you do... No I'll start that again. The ultimate goal of taking part in competitive sport is winning, but actually I'm an absolute believer in the ethos, that taking part is the primary focus of sport, winning is not necessarily the goal. Of course winning was fantastic, and you know whether it was my first school winning race, whether it is my Nationals, whether it was going to New York, getting picked to be part of the Paralympics squad, going and then ultimately being presented with the gold medal; they are just moments that are just life-changing because they are so self-affirming of who you are as a competitor and as a person. In terms of winning, winning gives you a certain, and additional confidence, yes, a confidence and a capacity to then see other challenges slightly differently because you've had a challenge and you've done the best you could do under that situation, in that challenge, which was winning the gold medal. So then what that gives you as a person I think is

irreplaceable and probably slightly different for everybody, but that kind of platform gives you as an individual the fire to go on to do other things - and for me that's the confidence to speak out for other people, that's the confidence to fight oppression because that's what I do, that's what I really believe in. I use my experiences now to work with others, I work with young disabled children now coaching basketball and swimming wherever I can, right through to advocating on behalf of other Disabled People and taking part in demonstrations against politics that I don't believe in.

You said you perceive sport as a medium to change the perception of the mainstream society towards Disabled People. Have you seen any major change now with the recent Paralympics and whether – if at all - British society has been influenced by it?

London 2012, I think, was a fantastic event. I had a degree of hope and a degree of anxiety about what London could deliver. And I think in terms of the games - I went to the games on three separate days and was just blown away by the atmosphere, the atmosphere in the stadiums and the atmosphere in the Olympic park. Which was something I hadn't expected, having been to 3 Paralympic games myself, Korea, which was 1988, was probably the closest in terms of atmosphere from my personal experiences, but London, just the feeling around in the games, in the arena, in the stadiums, was one of euphoria. That change and recognition from going "Isn't it good that these people are taking part in sports" to going "My god, look at these athletes, look how good they are". This is what we've been missing out on. So I think in terms of the general public -even though there are instances that I mentioned before, where some people are still ignorant and nothing will change that - but in terms of the general public there is a change, people want to know who you are, if they know you're a Paralympian, they want to talk to you about Paralympics, they want to know. "Did you go? What was it like when you were there? Do you think London was good?" And I thought London was fantastic, as a Games, as a venue, as a huge organised event and competition, and audience event, it was fantastic, it really was. And I think that is living on, I think that it's living on in everyday people. Unfortunately I don't think politically it's made the slightest bit of difference. I think it was good PR at the time until the Conservative MPs that went along were booed by the crowd - which says a lot really. And everything that's going on now in terms of politics and disability, it's really bad. Not all papers 'cause not all the papers do it, but certain papers like "Daily Mail" are constantly running stories to try to create negative opinions of Disabled People. So there's a backlash, there's a backlash based around Conservative politics (and you'll probably have to cut all this out) but if it's not too anachronistic when it gets viewed, this is a challenging time, post-London 2012 is a challenging time

for Disabled People because on the one hand you have got the legacy, the massive change in public perception of who Disabled People are and how they compete in sport, the fact that they've got families. It was headline news that Sarah the cyclist was having a baby now, and it was sort of "That's great, that's fantastic", and ok, it's got nothing to do with the sport, but it's showing this real change in perception of Disabled People as sports people and then how that filters through. Unfortunately really quite harshly tempered with the other side of politics which is being put across that Disabled People are scrounges and they are all work-shy and all the rest of it, which is the reality we face daily as Disabled People. And there are people including George Osborne, who was in the paper today, parking in a disabled parking space (Why? I don't know why, because it was easy for him. Sorry you will probably lose all of that.), but there is that constant challenge because it's a group of people who've traditionally been seen as weaker suddenly being put in positions where they're asserting their force and sometimes, as with Women's politics or any liberation politics, when the force begins to bite then there's a backlash and I think that is also going on quite harshly as well.

Let's go back to some more pleasant memories. What is the most important memory for you throughout your sporting career?

My most important memory, you should have asked me that yesterday and I could have thought about it...I've got so many memories, I've got a 20-year span of competitive swimming, at least twelve years at an international level. Finding a memory that really sticks out is quite difficult because I've got so many amazing memories. But for me and, thinking about it now I can get that tingly hair-standing-up moment, is walking out into the opening ceremony of the Seoul Paralympics into a stadium holding something like a 100 or 110 thousand people and then just roaring, just being in there, they talk about the cauldron of the games, that's the beginning, and then you are there and then they light the flame and at that point – look, it's genuinely doing that [showing his arm] –that lighting of the flame, and you're just like "This is real, we're here". And it was my second games, but as a memory, because that had the crowd, that 100 thousand people, they are there to see you, you're there as an athlete representing Great Britain, you're in your uniform, everybody is in their uniform, but you're in yours, you're there, you've got your Union Jack-based flag and you're part of that GB team. That's the kind of memory. I can replay you – from sitting outside, you have to sit outside forever, waiting, getting queued up in teams. You can imagine 3000-4000 athletes and support staff - they've got to get you all marshalled somewhere - ready to march in in the correct alphabetical order, so you're kind of there, but I can see myself sat in the playing field outside of the stadium looking at the five rings on the end of the

stadium which we could see, and the buzz, the anticipation of what it's all about, and you're talking to anybody and everybody because you're all there for the same life-changing experience. And going in and that flame being lit and then the planes go whoosh through the sky across the top of the stadium. Awesome!

Did you win a medal there?

I did, yes. I mean, I was very blessed with my swimming ability, which all in all led me to winning four there nine in all. I was blessed with a natural swimming ability which progressed through all that I did, and I was fortunate - I obviously worked extremely hard to get to where I got to - but I have a collection of 9 Paralympic Gold Medals. (That knowledge in me, it's 20 years ago and I don't troll it out everyday because it's not relevant to what goes on a daily basis.) My medals are in drawer... no, actually my mom has a beautiful case on her wall with the first set of medals that I won in 1984. So they're proud, beautifully proud parents. And it's thanks to them and the hours and hours they spent driving me to swimming pools and competitions and putting up with the early mornings and all the rest of it that we had to do... The competition, the medals, all go together, and I don't think... my experience wouldn't have been lessened by not winning; I was blessed with winning; winning was the icing on the experience, but the whole experience of disability sport and the gold medal is... I'm trying to make sense of this, sorry... what was the question?

You had this vivid memory of Seoul, so I just asked if it was a successful games for you...

So Seoul again – the experience of going to any games, but Seoul in particular brings back amazing memory. I went to four events and I actually won four gold medals. The process of getting there – you know, I had a ritual. Around the swimming pool was the Olympic park, and it had this amazing walk through, it that had music playing, and very sort of oriental gentle music playing and sculptures that they had specially commissioned for the games dotted through the park. And my ritual was to go into the park and actually go right down, really take myself down and focus, being kind of fiercely silent through the space and the music bringing me right into myself, and then I'd go into the venue, I'd warm up in a very insular[30,30]and focused way; and then you have to go into holding room, waiting to get called to an event, and each time I'd go in there and I'd have my swimming cap on, I'd have dark sunglasses, mirrored, because what it did was it kept other people from seeing into me, to keep that focus, and I had headphones and a stereo, 'cause I was also working for the BBC while I was in Seoul, I was the only person doing any live reporting back from Seoul at all, I was doing it as a competitor. The BBC had lent to me to do the interviews this amazing Sony professional Walkman, but what that meant was I could also use that as a part of my warm-up routine,

I'd had my headphones on and I would play Hüsker Dü or a guy called Brian Setzer or some other kind of really loud pumping music and I'd just be totally in myself and I'd keep those on right through to getting on to the pool side. By the time I got on the blocks I was utterly, utterly focused on what I was gonna do. Funnily enough, I don't remember where other people were: I just knew that I was at the front and I knew I had to stay there, I just went and stayed and kept I paced myself, through the music that was going through my head, I'd use the rhythm of the music that I kind of built into my head by that point into my stroke count and just knew where I was going. I never questioned what I was gonna do. I knew I was gonna win because it was in here [points to his head] and that was utterly about the challenge to me. And I think that's where I wanted to get: for me the competition is utterly personal and being the best in the world is a personal challenge, not a challenge to anybody else. I hope that makes sense.

I would like to ask you about the classification. Tara Flood was referring to classification as dehumanising because you would have this doctor-medical approach almost measuring all of your muscles and then putting you in a certain category. What is your experience with classification?

As a disabled athlete, to enable us to take part in meaningful competitive sport, then we have to go through a classification system, and I guess it, for me, is a necessary evil, because it creates the structure that allows you to compete in your event - whether that's cycling or whether that's swimming or whether that's archery - trying to create a competition where you won't be beaten by somebody because they've got more arms than you or more legs than you or they can stand better than you. So dividing, categorizing people or classifying people by their functional ability. Some people really, really hate classification. My way of dealing with classification is to think of it as a positive classification system. Rather than having a kind of picture of Adonis or some icon of human perfection and then telling people what they can't do - "You haven't got this, you can't do that, you're not able to do this, that's beyond you" - and kind of making people, dehumanizing them by what they haven't got, what they can't do, my way of dealing with classification is to think of it as positive classification system where you start with zero and then you get classified by what capacity you have; so if actually you're relatively able and you have all the function up to the end of everything except your right arm than that's a lot of positivity and that puts you into a class of people who score upwards. To make sense of it, there's 10 functional classifications (no one's nought because they would be dead), but from 1 to 10, 11 to 20 right through to a 100 would effectively be a non-Disabled Person - not a perfect person - what would be classed as someone who even if they have an impairment it doesn't affect their capacity to take part in

non-disabled sport. So that works for me, I'm classified by the fact, my positive score is the fact that from up here I'm damn strong [points to his waist] and I've got all that strength [points to his trunk] and for me I've got a very good mental understanding to be able to think about – in terms of swimming – think about the stroke, how to make the stroke better, how my hands are better, where the best position is. Even now, at 49, when I go swimming I think about my stroke and I always think, if I was to come back how would I do it and I strive, I challenge myself even now cause I guess you don't ever lose that bit of you, if you're a competitive person. The only people I'm not competitive with is my kids – and other people's kids – but what I do is I encourage them to be competitive by throwing in the odd bit that's gonna make sure that they understand they don't win everything but then they don't lose everything, instilling that understanding of competition.

But it is, as you said, not directive to be better than someone else but to be inspired and get this drive and challenge to get better than you rather than beating somebody.

The classification system is just a way of creating competition. When I go back and I say that your fiercest competitor is yourself so you don't need classification to compete against yourself, you just need you, and for me that excellence is utterly personal, because my excellence is different to somebody else's excellence, the growth, the change, the development you go through is focused on where you start and where you finish and I wanna hope that I can impart to [39.00] other people I work with and my children that idea of you as the focus of your own competition, to inspire yourself, to challenge yourself to do better in whatever you're doing, whether that's academic, whether that's cooking or whether that's competitive sport.

Can you tell me how you perceive the trend, the development of the Paralympic sport movement?

My understanding of the Paralympic movement is that it started small but had its own identity. If you go right back to its beginnings at Stoke-Mandeville it had its identity as a way, initially, of rehabilitation or reintegration. I think in some ways the idea of reintegration and rehabilitation has changed because the whole concept of what those words mean now to what they did 60 years ago is different in terms of the role that Disabled People do now play in society. The Paralympic movement itself has gone from strength to strength. I remember that in 1988 and 1992 there'd been massive arguments because the Paralympic team weren't allowed to use the Olympic logo – and that's still the case because the Olympic logo is the trademark of the Olympics and not the Paralympics. There were times where people would say "Shouldn't we be swimming in the Olympics, should it not be the same, should the Olympics be inclusive?"

and I've argued with myself about that for hours, weeks probably, over time. But now I think that Paralympics has its own identity and I personally now think that it shouldn't be subsumed into the Olympic, because that's what would happen, it would be subsumed into it and it would become secondary and you would still have "Here's the A finals, here's the B finals, and here's some Disabled People's finals". And I think that would possibly have a really diluting effect whereas actually now what we've got is we had the London Olympics and we had the London Paralympics. They weren't the same event, they were two distinct events that needed to maintain their identity and again I think London did the most amazing job in extending that identity and affirming that identity - in many, many places but in the UK hugely.

Do you think that the event should be run by Disabled People?

I think that all events should be run by people who know how to run events. That being said, if you're running a Paralympic games then having people who understand the additional needs that the Paralympic games will bring: access issues primarily and some of the individual needs of people; you have to have people who understand those brought in. But if I'm organizing a swimming gala, then I want to know that I've got people involved who know how to run swimming galas. So what needs to happen is that event management, sports event management, competition managements and careers and routes into those as jobs are open to everybody so that next time there's a big event coming along your pool of applicants or candidates is an inclusive pool. If you're a fantastic sports manager you can be organizing the Olympics whether you use a wheelchair or whether you're a blind person or whatever your issues are, it should come down to the skill base required to do the job, to run the event, so what does need to happen is to ensure that the opportunities to gain the skills and experiences are completely free to anybody who has the qualifications or capacity to move into that sport, that career opportunity.

You are working with creative industries, performing arts, writing, and as I understood from your website it should help Disabled People to deal with their disability and overcome it in a certain way by doing arts, performing. So I see two things: sport and art that can be the same channel. You do both, so could you compare and tell me something about how you perceive art?

I talked a lot about being a sportsman but actually I've got a second string to my bow, which is as a creative artist. I've written poetry since I was an angry teenager. And I was an angry teenager in terms of the oppression I faced as a Disabled Person and I'm probably on occasions still an angry almost-50-year old when it comes to dealing with how

you're treated as a Disabled Person. So for me I started writing poetry as another means to feel better about myself or feel better about the way I'm treated or feel better about how I'm perceived makes me feel. So again it's removing the perception, it's not about me being a Disabled Person but it's about how I'm made to feel as a Disabled Person. So I've done poetry, I've still got most of it. (I don't know if the camera goes over there, if it's in the picture, if it's not then there is a big rack of things I've written for the last 40 years.) So I've used my poetry very much as a kind of cathartic process, as a kind of artist-heal-thyself role and I actually don't think it's fundamentally that different from the sport in the sense that it's a way of focusing. Swimming was a way of pounding out some of that anger as well, I mean it wasn't just about competition, it's about - you can use it, you can work so hard and get rid of all aggressions and actually art is another way of doing that. So I wrote poetry and then as I got a bit older and realized that I wanted to perhaps try and sing some of it, I then started playing the guitar. So it was words first, guitar second (unfortunately singing itself comes a poor third.) But it is very much a route that I've used to personally share some of my demons perhaps. A lot of stuff I write now - and I then work with other people - is I write songs and plays and short stories that use situations, like each story or each poem is very often like a short story presenting a situation but usually with answers, which probably makes it sound really strange, how can you write songs like that, but Bob Dylan's always done it, most of the Beatles songs are short stories, really short stories if you listen to them, and that's what I create, but I create short stories that have a political edge to them. I found that that really, really works for me, and I go out and perform all over the place, but I also work with other people, not necessarily Disabled People, but people who find themselves in situations that are making them feel unbalanced in themselves, they're not happy, not necessarily mental health issues, but simply their personal equanimity is out of shape. And actually getting people to sit back, take the time. The courses I run I call "Permission to speak" and I chose that name, it's a descriptive name because actually that's what I'm giving people the opportunity to do in a safe environment to actually say "Aargh!" or "I love her" or whatever it actually is, I mean it doesn't necessarily have to be an angst situation that people are in, but obviously that's where it has one of its most profound effects, to work with people and say to them "It's ok to say how you feel, this is safe, let's use it, let's be creative". Then it actually works on lot of different levels because it does often give people a sense of release from an anxiety that they're experiencing, but it also makes them realise they can be creative, they can think creatively so you're giving them a tool to then go away with and write... they might not ever write another poem or a song, or you might've put them on the whole career path of poetry or song-writing or just a lifelong way of being able, if the going gets tough then the creative half gets going and you put yourself into that role and you almost become, you're almost an actor in your own life by being able to sit back and look at

yourself from the other side and then think how does it come across, what do I want to say and then put that across in an artistic way.

My last question, we touched on this political issue and I am interested in your view, what would you do, if you were a prime minister of this country, for Disabled People?

If I were a prime minister of this country, what would I do for Disabled People? I would make sure that the National Curriculum, rather than becoming some new Anglo-centric historical clap-trap starts to look at who people are so to use schooling to ensure that all people are seen as humans. I absolutely believe in the inalienable rights of human beings, we are all born free and it's only other people that harness us to their political system, their belief structures, their religions. If I were a prime minister I would use every means I've got to make society understand that actually what disables people is other people, not their impairments. And if other people change their attitudes, if civil engineers built places without steps, if employers didn't see the disability as something that would stop people from doing the job, then the world – the UK to start with - would be such a better place because we would all see each other as equal. And I think it's not just about Disabled People, my principle goes across all issues, racism, disable-ism, gender stereotyping, homophobia, ethical ethnic issues. It's about actually saying – we're all human beings, why do we need to categorize each other by what they can and can't do based on a set of misconceptions.