

Interview with Simon Jackson MBE on Friday 16 October 2012 at home

Neil Young interviewer

SJ = Simon Jackson (interviewee)

NY = Neil Young (interviewer)

NY: So the first question I wanted to ask you Simon was what first got you into athletics and judo in the first place?

SJ: Well, I was born visually impaired and I consider myself to have two disabilities – one is my visual impairment and the other one is that I have to be the best at whatever I do. Now, I went to a mainstream school, all the authorities wanted me to go to a special school but me mother and father didn't want me to be shipped off to Hereford which is about two and a half hours from here where we are now. So I went to a mainstream school and I was really sporty. Me mother and father are sporty – me father played professional rugby for Rochdale and me mother ran for the county and stuff – so I do have a sport gene in me somewhere. So I wanted to find a sport that I could do. Obviously the ball games are really difficult – you know, cricket, rugby really difficult. I'm a Liverpool fan so maybe I'd get a game at the moment for Liverpool because they're not that good. But I couldn't do it at a great level.

Me dad just sort of stumbled on an advertisement in the newspaper for a seven-week judo course in Rochdale and they took me a long to it and it was full of people who were fully-sighted, who could see, and it was a duck to water really. They had an eight-week course, I learnt with everybody else. At the end of the course there was a little judo competition – and these were all fully sighted people – and I won it and I thought “that's it, this is the sport for me”. Judo lends itself to a visual impairment because it's tactile – you don't do judo until you've got hold of each other – so it's perfect for somebody like me who has bad eyes. At the beginning we stand about three or four feet apart and it's quite difficult but as soon as we get hold of each other that playing field is dead level and I can beat everybody.

NY: Great. So it sounds like your parents were really supportive, I mean, you might want to talk a bit more about that or other sources or people who inspired you.

SJ: I want to do that at the end. Do you want us to go over that now, yeah?

NY: Yeah.

SJ: Are you, like, going to intertwine this?

NY: It will be edited.

SJ: Right cos cos I'll sort of talk about how they've gone to the Olympics and stuff for me so I didn't really want to get to that until we got to them.

NY: That's fine, that's fine, however it makes sense to you.

SJ: Does it not matter that, OK? [Clears throat] Anyway so, yeah, I went to the judo class and we had an eight-week course and I won it at the end of that. And me father and me mother really

wanted me to do something in sports so they were made up that I could actually do a sport with everybody else. I didn't want to be... all throughout my life I've never wanted to be singled out as a visually impaired person. I am a normal person who's got bad eyes. So I didn't want to, sort of, transcend that then into my sports career where I did a specialist sport for somebody with bad eyes. I wanted to do something that all my mates did because all me mates could see cos I went to a sighted school. So I wanted to hang out with them, I didn't want to go to a special school or a special sports' club. Like I said, judo was perfect for me.

I carried on and I started to get to a good level and I started to get to a good level. I was competing in like national competitions all over the country and that's where the real dedication of your parents comes in because, you know, obviously I can't drive. I'm a fifteen year-old, fourteen, thirteen-year old boy, you can't drive anyway. So you need the support of your parents and my mum and dad were just unbelievable. I mean, I'm talking, every other weekend we were out on the road, going to Scotland, going to London, going to Plymouth, going to Torquay - all over the country fighting and competing in competitions. And that's on top of training five days a week.

Me dad – we're in 2012 now, me father passed away a couple of months ago – and my father was me best friend in the whole world because I spent a lot of time with me dad. He was a salesman – he had his own company and he went out selling all over the country – and this is not an exaggeration, he would drive to Plymouth in a day – that's three hundred mile – so he would be up at two o'clock, he'd drive to Plymouth, he'd do a sales call, he'd drive home to Rochdale where we are now, he'd pick me up at half past six and take me to judo. And he'd sit and never go out – and watch me do judo five days a week, he never missed. So all of the things that I have won in my career would be impossible without my parents. So, you know, I don't think I would be where I am now without them. But they took me everywhere and it paid off because at the age of fifteen I was ranked number one in Britain for the under-18s, for the sighted. So I'd actually got, before I started competing within Paralympic sport, I'd actually got to a very, very high level within sighted judo which was great for me because I got a good grounding from the age of seven to the age of fifteen, so I had a good grounding before my international career started.

NY: And, it would be really interesting for you to talk about what the training involved at that age.

SJ: Yeah, um, I run my own judo club now in Rochdale and I've got about thirty-two kids come regularly, every week. It's strange really because I'm a big believer that you'd don't really need to do more than once or twice a week as a kid, because there are so many other sports that they can do, you don't want to overload them with one sport. I was a little bit different because it was my sport. It wasn't like I went to judo on a Monday, football on Tuesday, rugby on a Wednesday – I didn't do all those other sports because I couldn't do them so at the age of seven or eight I was doing judo at least three times a week. By the age of ten I was doing it five or six and I wouldn't get my kids now at my judo club to do five six times a week. But for me it was a bit different because it was my one and only sport. And me dad and me mum never had to make me go. I always wanted to go to judo – it didn't matter, I just wanted to go. I wanted to come home from school, do my homework, put my judo kit on and go to judo. So like I said

between the age of ten and fifteen I was doing at least four, between four and six nights a week judo and I was also going up to a place in Kendal, which was like a designated judo school. I was going there – the weekends I weren't competing – I was up in Kendal doing rock climbing, canoeing, loads of general fitness and three hours judo a day every Saturday and Sunday. So me dad would drive to Kendal on a Friday night, drop me off, I'd do two days judo then he'd drive to Kendal to pick me up, which is a good two hour drive from here. So dedication on all three people – me self and me mother and father and training to a reasonably high standard at the age of fifteen.

NY: Great and a lot of people talk about the people who have disabilities of being involved in sports, that it can be really powerful in terms of rehabilitation or just participating. What is your own view on that given your own story?

SJ: I think sport is for everybody – able-bodied, disabled – doesn't really matter to be honest with you. It's a great leveller because it doesn't matter how good you are on one specific day you might not be the same the day after, so you soon realize that you have to give a hundred per cent every time you step onto a judo mat or whatever sport you're doing. From a disability point of view I think it has a double whammy. I've got a lot of friends out of judo that I would never had met and they're lifetime friends. I've known people since I were seven or eight year old and I will know them until the day I go. So for me judo's been – it's a bit different now because now it's more recreational than its ever been for me because I've retired so now I can go and have enjoy, I can go and have a good session with the lads and go and have a couple of pints after – that's more recreational.

You know, throughout my career judo has been a job so I've been going, I've been focused, as soon as I've finished I've warmed down and I've wanted to get some food down me to get the nutrition back in. It's been a lot more serious in the past than it is now. I'm probably enjoying it more now because it's more recreational but the rewards aren't there because you're not competing in front of thousands of people but, you know, I think as a vehicle to get disabled people off their back sides and out of their houses sport is one of the most rewarding things you can do. And I think it also, if you integrate into a mainstream sporting club it breaks down all the barriers that people have about disabled people cos there are still a lot of barriers out there, you know. People are scared of disabled, you know, of asking about your disability or mentioning the word 'disabled' but if you've got a couple of people in your sports clubs who are disabled those barriers will be coming down really, really quick.

NY: Great and given what you are just saying – obviously there are still lots of barriers to people with various different kinds of disabilities – in your own life, I mean I am sure there are times it has been an advantage – and I would be interested to hear about that – and also about where there's been difficulties for you to overcome.

SJ: I have difficulties, you know, being visually impaired it not easy. It's not easy. I have to plan everything that I do. In my life now – I'm forty years old now and I have to plan every journey to make sure I know where I am going. And in the past I have had hard times at judo. When I was fighting sighted judo people tried to come from the side because my peripheral vision is not very good so they would realize that and they would come at me from the side. And you learn to overcome it. You do learn to use your other senses. But I think the most important thing is

when you do face a problem you face it head on. You don't let that problem beat you. I never let anything beat me. If somebody beat me at judo they had to work really hard to beat me and there is no way my visual impairment, or me having to struggle for something is going to beat me, I just used to work around it. People coaching around when I was a kid – I can't see the judo coach when he's doing the demonstration on another player, so I'd asked the coach to do the demonstration on me because then I feel it, so then I know what's happening because like I said before judo's tactile. So the coach does a demonstration on me, I know what's happening. The players start running round the side of me – the judo mats are square. So I go to one corner and they can only come head on. So, you know, they're little tactics you have to put in place. And I think when people started trying to beat me by coming to the side it was a great honour – the only way they could beat me is by using my disability to their advantage and it just made me compete and train harder: it's fuel isn't it? People pour that fuel into me and I'll just train harder to beat them.

NY: That's great. And I think it would be helpful for people for you to describe what it is you can see – just because then it labels it.

SJ: Yeah. I've got an eyesight disability called retinosis pigmentosa, which means I can see about that far [gestures a few inches in front of his face]. In the dark I can't see anything, nothing at all in the dark. I can't read print, I use a mobile phone that talks to me – there's a well-known company, it's a fruit, and the phone speaks to me and the laptop they talk to me as well so that's how I surf the Internet and do my correspondence and stuff like that.

Getting around I can walk around as long as I know where I'm going to be honest with you because I memorise – I've got a fantastic memory. I do know me environment really well. I know where every lamp post is around where I need to go. If I go to certain buildings I know where the toilets are, how many steps there are. It's not something that I have to think about, it's just something that's in me. And I think it's like when people say you lose a sense, you know, your other senses become heightened, and stuff so my hearing is very good and me memory, me photographic memory for buildings and surroundings is really good. I can't really gauge my eyesight on what you can see because I've been like this all me life so I can't actually say "I can't see colours, I can't see this, it's blurred" but it's not blurred to me. But if I put my eyes in anybody else they would be like "woah – how does he survive?" but to me, I was born like this so it's just normal everyday life to me.

NY: Great. OK, so, I would be really interested for you to talk through your Paralympic career, perhaps starting with your first Paralympics and what that was like and then taking us through.

SJ: Well, like I said before, I was ranked number one when I was fifteen in Britain and a lady came up to me called Eileen Cartnow – and she was the team manager for the visually impaired judo team – and she said "would you like to come and compete with the visually impaired judo team?" And I wasn't too keen at first to be honest with you because like I said before I didn't want to ever do a specialist sport for my eyesight because I was competing in mainstream judo. Anyway, we went a long – me and me dad – because it was extra training and I realized how good visually impaired people were at judo, not just me.

Anyway I went to the European Championships when I was fifteen and I won the gold medal, and became European champion, which then qualified me in 1988 to go to the Paralympic Games in Seoul. And that's totally different. The Paralympics is something that you can't describe, you can't explain it to somebody and you can't really prepare them for how big it is. You go out to the games and the first thing you do is get your tracksuit and all your t-shirts and all your stuff. You know you've got your Great Britain gear and I'd never had that before – it was fantastic to put a Great Britain tracksuit on – it was brilliant. We travelled out to Seoul and that's like a twenty-five hour flight so that's something I'd never done before either. And you go out there and judo's massive in Seoul so everyone was coming to watch the judo.

But before the competition starts you go to the opening ceremony. To try and explain to somebody to walk in front of eighty thousand people in a stadium – you cannot explain that. I am very jealous now of footballers, they get to do it twice a week and I think they don't realize how lucky they really are. But it was a fantastic experience to walk in with your blazer and your suit on and your shirt and tie and stuff and have the announcer shout out "Great Britain" and you all walk in. It was a fantastic experience and obviously with my first one it was really special. The competition came two days after and there was twenty five thousand in the crowd for the judo because judo is massive in Korea – the second biggest sport after Tae Kwon Do.

I drew a Brazilian first fight and he was probably one of the weaker players in the weight category and I beat him in about two and an half minutes. I remember it really well. I threw him for two seven-point scores, I was quite dominant and it sort of got me off, up and running then. I was only sixteen years old so I had no nerves to be honest with you because nobody expected to win, nobody expected me to do anything, I was just going for experience and if I could win a fight, fantastic.

I had a few more rounds and then I got through to the semi-final and I fought a Korean in the semi-final. So obviously the crowd are shouting for this Korean boy and about a minute and a half into the fight his arm dropped off me and I thought "that's not right" but I kept on competing and the referee said "Mate" which is stop and he had dislocated his shoulder. And he went off the mat and I thought: "well that's the end of that then" and just stood on my line on the mat. The doctor clicked it back in and he came back on. He came back on five times and went off five times because I kept pulling the arm, every time the referee said "start" I started fighting and grabbed his arm and kept pulling it and he kept popping his shoulder out. We were on the mat for twenty-nine minutes all together. Not fighting but we were actually stood on the mat and he was going off and having it clicked and I have to stay on the mat when he has to go off to have a medical. So the crowd were really booing me, they were really anti-me by then but I got through and I got to the final and I fought a Japanese in the final. Now through centuries of war the Japanese and the Koreans don't like each other so the Korean crowd had half an hour been booing me, now they were cheering for me. And I remember standing across the mat and facing the Japanese boy and I was scared because to fight a Japanese is like the ultimate in judo cos they created it they invented it. So there's sort of a mystique about them – you think they are better than what they are. Anyway we started fighting and it was a tough fight, a very tough fight – it was 50:50 to be honest with you and I just managed to get a three-point score in about a minute. And I hung onto this score for quite a while and then the referee give me a penalty for not attacking so that evened it up. So I thought: "right, I need to attack

here” because he had done most of the work because I was in front and he was chasing the fight. Anyway with about two minutes – about a minute and a half – to go I attacked him again and got a five-point score and I knew that was a big enough score to hang onto. So I got into the trenches, got my head down, I toughed it out to the end and I won my first Paralympic gold medal from Seoul. These three I am going to show you in the next ten-minute talk are the only three Olympic or Paralympic gold medals for judo that Britain has ever won. I’m the only man to have ever won one.

Anyway it was a fantastic experience. After I’d won the competition, all the other weights were won by Japanese, I was the only Westerner to win a gold medal, so the Koreans took me everywhere. They took me to every judo club in Korea – I was doing three a night showing the medal off and showing my skills. I was treated like a bit of a superstar really. It was really special, Korea. On some hands it wasn’t great because me mum and dad couldn’t go out there cos it was a long way and it was really expensive to go out there. But on the other hand, obviously, it was my first one and there was no pressure on me, so I really enjoyed me first Paralympic experience. I wouldn’t say it was my best but it was really special.

Four years after I went to Barcelona and I was current, the reigning Paralympic, World and European judo champion when I got to Barcelona. I had a couple of bumpy fights on the way up to Barcelona in the qualifying and stuff and I’d got a little bit cocky in the couple of years before. But I nearly got beat a couple of times but luckily I come through them. So it had put my feet on the ground and I trained really, really hard. I had really put the work in. I really wanted to defend my title. I got the first fight, I got the same Brazilian boy and I beat him quite easily again. Then I had about another six fights – I had a lot of fights in Barcelona – I had twelve fights all together. And I got through to the semi-final where I fought a Japanese in the semi-final. And this Japanese guy was really good and the mat was raised, you had to go up three steps to the mat area so it was raised so it looked really good for the crowd. I was beating the Japanese guy – I got a seven-point score, a five-point score – and I was well on top but I just couldn’t finish it off. And we came to a clinch and the referee said: “Mate” and I’d seen the red mist a little bit and I pushed this Japanese guy and he nearly fell off the podium. And I thought I was in trouble with the referee to be honest with you and I sort of walked back to my line dead sheepish with my head down because I thought I would be going to get a penalty for sort of like, you know, not sporting conduct. But luckily they didn’t look on it too bad and I ground it out and we went to the final, went five minutes, it went the distance but I was well up on scores so I got through to the final.

In the final – I fought a Spaniard in the final. Now I had fought this Spaniard a few times the year before, and a couple of years before that, and I’d beat him quite easily. I was very surprised that he actually got to the final. I think he’ll have been really surprised. He never really featured in any other competition I think. Home crowd, his home turf, it pulled him through. As soon as the referee said start – “Hajime” – I attacked him and threw him in five seconds for ten, which is a knockout and I won my second Paralympic gold medal.

Now we were talking before about support from me parents [clears throat] I’ve got fantastic support, I had fantastic support from my dad. I beat this guy in five seconds and about two month after me and me dad watched the DVD and he said: “you know something Si? If you’d

have done that you could have done him in three.” And that’s exactly what I needed because you can’t think you’re the best, you can’t believe you are the best – you have to strive to be better. And having somebody like my dad – he wasn’t like criticism for criticism’s sake, it was criticism to make me get back in the gym, get back on the judo mat and strive to be better than what I was in Barcelona. And like he said I could’ve done it in three.

I went to my third Paralympic Games in Atlanta in 1996. Now winning the gold medals is fantastic and that’s something that I do and nobody can help me. I have to do it myself. I have to step on the mat; I have to compete. But I think one of the biggest honours that can be put on somebody is being able to carry the flag in the opening ceremony because there’s five hundred athletes, a lot of staff and only one person can carry that flag. And I was given the honour in Atlanta to carry the flag. I thought it was really brave because I’m visually impaired and I could not walk any way round the track – I could have gone the wrong way or the right way. So I thought it was a brave move, giving it to a visually impaired person. But they bestowed it on me and I was really honoured to carry the flag. I stood in the tunnel, stood behind a country I’d never heard of but I wasn’t bothered because I had the Great Britain flag in my hand and when that announcer said: “the next team into the stadium is Great Britain, Simon Jackson from Rochdale”, which is an amazing something to think about, I was the first man in that stadium leading his country into an opening ceremony for the Paralympic Games. It didn’t get much better than that. There was a hundred thousand people in that crowd and I believed that they were shouting for me because I was the flag bearer, I was at the front, everybody could see me, all eyes were on me; and it was a fantastic experience that I am so glad that the rest of the team managers in all the other sports voted for me because I really, at the time it was fantastic, and when I look back on it now – we’re talking, what, about sixteen years ago, it blows my mind to think that I walked in carrying the flag, it was fantastic.

It spurred me on cos two days afterwards it was the competition and I thought: “I’d better do well because I’m gonna look really stupid if I don’t win. I’ve just carried the flag and if I come away with a bronze or no medal I’ll look really daft.” I had a really good competition in Atlanta. I fought really, really well. They had statistics at the end of it and every attack I made, apart from one, I threw my opponent for ten so I knocked everyone out with the first attack I made. I had six fights and I think all the time I was on the mat I was two and half minutes on the mat for all the fights put together. I was totally dominant in Atlanta and I fought an Argentinian in the final – Fabian Ramirez – and that’s the guy I had to do two attacks on because the first attack I only got a seven-point score, which is not a clean knockout, and then the second attack I got a clean ten. And there’s loads of shots of me on the Internet of me jumping up, saluting the crowd and all the crowd were shouting: “Jackson [clap, clap, clap], Jackson”. And there were loads of Brits that came to watch me – from the power lifters to the swimmers – and my reputation had grown and I won my third consecutive Paralympic gold medal.

And I think that people came to watch me in the Paralympic Games because I was quite dynamic. I was heart on my sleeve, all action to be honest with you. I didn’t really want to grind a result out, I wanted to knock them out – I wanted to throw them for a clean ten. And I think people who didn’t really understand what judo rules were just liked to come and watch me fight because it was quite... he’s not a hero of mine as a person but as a fighter Mike Tyson was a big hero because he walked into the ring and everyone was scared and he was dynamic and

explosive. I walked onto a judo mat in the nineties and everyone was scared. There was a story that my judo coach used to tell that the night before the competition you have a draw – who fights who – and every time the teams would get in the opposite draw to me they cheered. Nobody wanted to get in my side of the draw and by the time I got to Atlanta I was three, what's that, twelve years unbeaten. So I'd never been defeated. I had gone a hundred and no defeats.

I went onto Sydney in 2000 and the inevitable happened really. I got beaten in the semi-final off a lad called Alonso Cruz. It was a tough fight and it's weird because I've never had an out of body experience – and I don't believe in all that – but there's a bit in the fight where we were off the side of the mat and I was on me face and he was trying to strangle me. Referee said: "mate", he got up and went back to his spot and I was sort of on my elbows. And I could hear the announcer – because they were doing like a commentary – and I could hear the announcer say: "can Simon Jackson pull this five-point score back? It could be his first defeat ever." And it felt like I was listening to somebody's fight, it was really strange. It felt like I wasn't there and I could feel it slipping away from me in the fight and that's a horrible feeling because I was digging in and I was into my boots and I was breathing and my heart rate must have been round 190. I was giving everything I had but I just couldn't drag this five-point score back and he was the first man to beat me, Alonso Cruz, 158 fights, no defeats and he was the first man to beat me. It was really strange really because the reason why he got into judo in Cuba is he seen me on the TV in the Paralympics in 1988 and said: "I want to do that, I've got a visual impairment, I want to be like him", and then twelve years after he's beating me in a Paralympic Games. So it was no comfort for me, to be fair, but he sort of beat his childhood hero, which is you know, a bit strange.

I had to come back from that because in judo you don't lose a semi-final and then automatically get a bronze. I had to fight for a bronze. I had fight the current world silver medallist who I had beat two years previous. So it was a tough fight for the bronze. He threw me for a five-point score straight away and I thought: "My God, I'm gonna get beat twice in one day". So I just dug in and I managed to throw him for a ten after about another two or three minutes. So I got the bronze and at the time the bronze meant nothing but now I am retired the bronze doesn't mean as much as a gold obviously but it does mean something, I was third best in the world on that day.

Then I went to Athens in 2004 and I actually got beat in the first round in Athens. I fought this Ukranian boy called Seluruh and I'd done all the attacking. I had done everything and he should have had a couple of penalties for not attacking and with three seconds to go he made his first attack and the referee give it a three point score and that gave no chance to get it back. It was a really bad decision it's not me just saying this. The judo competition is over three days and the referee made that bad a decision in my fight that they actually sacked him that night and he didn't do the next two days. So, I'm sort of vindicated, it's not me having sour grapes saying: "the referee was rubbish" and all this. The referee got sacked that night so it was the worst decision I have actually seen in judo but it put me out of the competition so I didn't actually take any medal. I only had one fight in Athens and I was finished for ten which was good because I got to go to the pub by eleven so I had a few beers by the evening time when all the coverage came

on TV, about eight o'clock. And my mobile phone just went mad about half past eight. I must have had hundred and fifty, two hundred messages from people saying: "that's the worst decision we've ever seen". I had had quite a lot of lager by then, it didn't really matter – ouzo I'd had actually as we were in Greece. It was a really bad thing that happened to me but it didn't upset as much as Sydney cos in Sydney I actually got genuinely beat by the Cuban boy, Alonso Cruz; in Athens I got robbed by the referee so it didn't really upset me. You can't fight the referee and the player at the same time – that's humanly impossible. So that's my Paralympic career.

NY: OK, so, I would be really interested and think people would love to hear about what the Paralympics mean to you really.

SJ: Yeah. Well I went to first Paralympic Games in 1988 and the profile wasn't very big in England. We got an hour's programme I think, twice, three times a week. Luckily because I'm quite gobby and me judo's quite dynamic I got quite a lot of coverage. But the country that the Paralympics were held in they took it really serious. It was a massive event – the Koreans really took it to heart and the stadiums were full, they were enthusiastic, and it was a fantastic experience, you were in that bubble. And then you sort of come home and there isn't much really, you get a little bit here and a little bit there. You hit a massive high and then a little bit of depression when you came home which was a bit strange.

Barcelona it grew again... my Mum and Dad had to queue for tickets for the judo, that's how popular it was. They couldn't get tickets for the opening ceremony, it was full it was sold out. So Barcelona was the turning point and the Spanish really did it well. There was no difference between the Olympics and the Paralympics. Every facility was the same, all the village was the same, everything you got in the village was the same. The disability movement in Spain is fantastic so they really went to town. It took a step back in Atlanta because the Paralympics was something that the Americans had to do because of the Olympics and there was different venues – the judo venue wasn't as big as the sighted judo venue. There were about five thousand people stood outside the Paralympic judo venue because they couldn't get in because there was no room. So you know the Americans had underestimated how much the Americans would take disabled sport to their hearts. So it went back a step in Atlanta even though it was a fantastic games for me. We got more coverage in Atlanta in Britain – on those sort of aspects it was fantastic for me because I got to go to the Sports Personality and got interviewed on the Sports Personality by Sue Barker after 1996. The profile was a lot higher.

Sydney stepped it up again. Sydney went massive with it – it was huge. The Australians just loved it – they love sport anyway and they love disabled sport. There is a walkway that goes up to the main Olympic stadium in Sydney and its all cobbles and every medalist from the Olympic and the Paralympics has got a cobble with their name on it and what they won and what sport on it. So there's a cobble in Sydney with my name, my judo, I only got a bronze but thank God I got that bronze because I wouldn't have got a cobble. And it's great because some of my kids have been to Australia – my judo kids – and they've come back and taken photographs of my cobble on the street. So Australia did a really, really good job and the BBC did a cracking, fantastic job – the media coverage was better still for Sydney. Athens – the games were a step back in Athens, to be honest with you. The host, they didn't take it as seriously as the Olympics

but the British coverage was second to none, they did a really good job. Obviously Beijing was the first one that I sat out – I didn't compete in Beijing. The BBC did a fantastic job and now we're sat when this is being filmed it's 2012, we've just come off the most successful Paralympic Games ever and the host media centre was Channel 4 and I was lucky enough to do the punditry for the judo and the cycling for Channel 4 and there was no difference between the Olympics and the Paralympics. Great Britain should be proud of what they did in 2012. The Paralympics were put on a world stage and Rio de Janeiro must be scared stiff because they've got to match that. And the Paralympics mean everything to me. It's the pinnacle of my career. When I started as a judo player I never dreamed that I could be sat here with three Paralympic golds, three World Championship golds, fifteen European golds. I never believed that I could do that and every person who does a minority sport, or a non-professional sport the pinnacle of their career is the Olympics and for me it's the Paralympics. The Paralympics is something where I can compete with people with the same disability as me where everything is equal apart from the skill factor and on three Paralympic Games, twelve years my skill factor and my wanting and my desire was better than everybody else. I am extremely proud to, not have been, I am a Paralympian. Once you are Olympic or Paralympic champion you are always Olympic or Paralympic champion, it doesn't matter whether it is twenty years or current, you are always the Paralympic champion so I am immensely proud to have competed in five Paralympic Games, been involved in a big way in 2012 doing the media and stuff and it is the pinnacle of my career and I hope that I have inspired many more disabled and able-bodied people to try and strive for their dreams. My dream was to compete at the Paralympics and I competed at five: won three, third in one, last at the other – it's not a bad record.

NY: It would be really interesting for people to hear about your cycling experiences

SJ: Yeah in 2007 I was fighting in the world championships and I popped a disc at the bottom of my back so that sort of put paid to my judo career, that's why I retired, and like I say I work in a school now for kids that have been permanently excluded from school. We took them down to the Velodrome, Manchester – it's only about half an hour from where we are now – and the kids were all riding round on the Velodrome on the bikes and stuff. And a guy called Barney Storey came up to me, and he said: "you're the judo guy aren't ya?" and I said "yeah, yeah" and I knew his wife Sarah, I'd been on the Paralympic team, she's a swimmer and now she's a cyclist and he said: "do you want to have a go at cycling?" and I said: "Yeah, I'll have a go". So the following Sunday we went down to the Velodrome at ten o'clock in the morning, turned up in trackie bottoms and me t-shirt and trainers and he gave me a load of gear, cycling gear. I am not used to wearing Lycra but I got used to it. And it was a tandem – I was on the back and he was on the front and he is a world-class pilot is Barney. We did two hours going up the track and I really enjoyed it and he said: "you're really smooth on the back" and stuff. In two hours we had a little time trial, two hundred metre time trial and that time would have got me seventh in the world championships and I'd only done it two hours! But I train every day you see, my fitness levels – I still train every day now – my fitness levels are really high. So they put me in a competition three weeks after – the Paralympic World Cup and me and Barney won two silver medals, in the kilometre time trial and the sprint. The guy who beat us went on to win the Paralympics in 2008, Anthony Kappes, so I was beat by the Paralympic champion but I beat a lot of other people and I'd only been doing three weeks. So I actually left the job and

went full-time on the cycling team for a couple of yours but unfortunately I didn't make London 2012 – I missed out by two one hundredths of a second. Anthony Kappes beat me again and he went on to win the gold medal in London 2012. The cycling was a fantastic experience for me. It was something different, I won a world silver medal in the kilometer time trial so I was at a world level in two different sports but I'm still always a judo player. But I'm really glad I did the cycling because it give me something to look back on and I've got some great memories, lots of good friends down at the cycling, the coaches were fantastic, got to hang out with Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton and Bradley Wiggins and all those guys. You are sort of mixing with superstars and training with superstars and now you see those guys winning the Tour de France and stuff. It was a fantastic experience and I am so happy that he spotted me at the Velodrome that day.

NY: It would be really interesting for people to hear about everything about you be awarded an MBE, how that came about

SJ: Yeah. We came back from Atlanta in about September. We'd flown out from Atlanta to Japan and we competed in Japan and then we flew back home. And then about a month later I got a brown envelope dropped through the floor and usually I ignore them because they are a bill, normally a council tax bill or some phone bill or something like that, so normally I ignore them. I opened it and it was a letter from the Queen and I was quite shocked really because normally she emails me and twitters me but it was a letter from Buckingham Palace for "your services to judo the Majesty the Queen would like to award you with an MBE if you would like to accept". Like I was going to say no. I'm from Rochdale I'm not going to say no to an MBE.

So we got to go down and it was a fantastic experience – you have three guests. At the time I was single which was quite handy then because if I had had a girlfriend or a wife I'd have been in real trouble because I took me mum, me dad and me brother [laughs]. It's got three guests so somebody would've got dropped and I don't who it would have been. We got to go down to Buckingham Palace and you get to drive in which is weird cos you sort of go and you see everybody stood at the gates and you're driving in – the police are checking under the car and stuff – and you go in.

You get your MBE and it's something special to be awarded an MBE. I had to win three consecutive gold medals to get there but it was a real honour. The same day Paul McCartney was getting his knighthood and the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me really. We were stood in the courtyard of Buckingham Palace and there's about three hundred people and we're stood there, chatting to me dad, me brother and me mum and the people just started to part and Paul McCartney walked up. And we were thinking: "oh, he's gonna walk right past us here". And we're sort of looking behind us to see if he had seen anybody and he walked right up to me and he shook me by the hand and said: "I've seen you on TV, well done". And I was like – and I'm never stuck for words, never – and I was like [does impression of being lost for words] thanks, thanks a lot". As he was walking off I said: "Paul can I have your autograph and can I have a picture?" – "yeah, no worries". So he put his arm round me and me mum had a camera and he said: "hurry up before I throw this guy to the ground". And I went: "you don't think so do ya?" and he said: "I won't do that really". Anyway we took the picture and everything – it was a great day apart from one massive mistake that my mum made – she

forgot to put film in her camera. So I had got a picture with Paul McCartney, he had his knighthood, I had my MBE but she'd forgot to put the film in the camera. But that was a fantastic day and a great honour to be awarded the MBE.

NY: Great and shall we move on to talk about the Sports Personality Award that you got from the BBC?

SJ: Well, also in 1996 the profile was a lot higher when I came back from Atlanta. We got invited to the Sports Personality – me and my brother went down and we stayed in a fancy hotel and it was a great experience. We sat in the crowd watching the show and stuff – it's totally live the Sports Personality. And about an hour into the show the floor manager came up when the adverts were on or they show the different sports montages, when they were on, and pinned a radio mike on me and said: "you're going to be interviewed now by Sue Barker". I never knew about this, this was like totally off the cuff. So I thought: "Right, I need to make it here because you only get one chance to make a little bit of a name for yourself. I need to make it. It's live so they can't edit it. Fantastic." So we went down and Sue Barker was asking me questions like: "how have you won all these 156 fights, no defeats?" I said: "I am dedicated Sue, I train every day of me life – judo is my life. That's a bit sad I suppose" I said "but I do go out now and again and chase as many girls as I can" and she laughed. And then I said: " By the way Sue you look very nice tonight" and I got a big round of applause and she was going a bit red, and I said: " but don't take it as too much of a compliment, I am visually impaired". And the crowd was just going mad. You could just see Frank Bruno and Evander Holyfield were sat behind me and they sort of fell of their chairs they were laughing that much. It was a great night because everyone came up to me and said you're a funny guy – Des Lynam and all the great superstars of sport, Beckham came up and they were all saying: "that's the funniest thing I've ever heard". And to top it the Paralympic and Olympic teams were given the team of the year that year. So I got to get one of the little cameras on the tripod and stuff to put on the mantelpiece. So 1996 was a fantastic year for me and to go to the Sports Personality and be interviewed and win an award was a real special moment.

NY: Great. Now I want to move onto where you are now and the future. What would be your message to young athletes, young people – whether they are disabled or not disabled – what would you have to say to them?

SJ: Well as we sit here now, it's 2012 and I've been retired for a couple of years now. I just do the media stuff now for the Paralympics Games, which is good. The money is a lot better than the fighting so that's a lot easier and it's a lot easier on me ears. I teach in a school, like I said, for kids that have been permanently excluded from school and deprived backgrounds and stuff and it is a really rewarding job. I do my job with the same things that I did with judo – I give one hundred per cent. I think, like at the beginning of this I said I've got two disabilities – one I have to be the best but to be the best you have to try the hardest you can try. Not everyone can sit and be a Paralympic champion but as long as you have done your best in your life that's all that anybody can ask for. So I think if I've got a legacy and I've got a message for young people – disabled or able-bodied (I don't want to pigeon-hole myself to just disabled people) – is do your best. I have my own judo club and I have thirty-two kids there and I don't care if they don't win a medal: I'm not bothered about that. As long as they go on that judo mat and give everything

they've got and wring every bit of talent out of themselves that they have. Not everyone can be the best – there's only one gold medalist – that's why it's a gold and it takes a lot of work and a lot of effort and a lot of talent to get there. But as long as you try hard in everything that you do you can achieve whatever you want to achieve. And if it's just on, taking my judo kids as an instance, it's just stepping on that mat and competing. That's a challenge to some kids because their nerves are that bad. That's a challenge. But as long as they give their best and do their best I can't ask any more of them and they can't ask any more of themselves. So, I've done throughout my life – I've dedicated myself, I've strove to be the best at my field of judo and the only reason I got there was every time I trained – sometimes I was up at 5 o'clock in the morning running, sometimes I was doing judo at ten o'clock at night, sometimes I was doing weight-training, sometimes I was running up a mountain carrying a lad on me back – I give a hundred per cent: and if you do that you won't go far wrong and nobody can ask any more of you.

NY: You do external speaking. I would be interested to hear who you do that speaking to and what people's response is to what you have to say.

SJ: I do. I enjoy talking and I enjoy talking about myself – it's my favourite subject as me family keep telling me. I talk to everybody from school kids to after dinner speaking. Each one is a challenge. After-dinner speaking you can be a little bit more blue and you can make people laugh and you can tell them the stories with adult content and I really enjoy those sort of circumstances. It's great because people are enjoying themselves, they are all out for a good time, and you tend to have a comedian on and you tend to have a sportsman who does after dinner speaking. I'm really relaxing doing it, I enjoy it, the money's quite good so I do enjoy the after dinner speaking.

But I think my favourite one is going into schools because kids these days have got so many distractions and we are becoming a society that doesn't do much any more. We're all sat on our PlayStations and PS3s and whatever other stuff they play on. It needs someone like me to go into schools and motivate them. I go in and I talk to them on their level. I'm not going in talking to them about sports science – they're not interested about that. They want to know: "when did you go to a judo competition, who did you fight, how did you get there, did you win, how did you win, what did it feel like?" – talk on their level. I always get really good responses from the schools, I have to be honest. All the teachers – it might be a little bit arrogant on my part – but they always do say that I've been the best speaker they've ever had. They probably say it to the next guy who goes as well to be fair but it's good for the ego. Let's not beat around the bush. I'm retired now and throughout my judo I've competed in front of thousands and thousands of people and it's the buzz, it's a massive buzz. So to sort of recreate that buzz I can stand up in front of eight hundred school kids and tell them my story and I can see them all wide-eyed and you get a massive clap after and they all want an autograph with a your picture and stuff – it's good for the ego, it's really good for the ego. I'm giving a lot back because I'm inspiring these kids and helping them focus and showing kids – as I keep saying, I'm from Rochdale, it's a deprived area Rochdale, and I've done all right for myself. So if I can inspire other kids to strive my job here is done and along the way my ego gets a slap on the back, which is good.

NY: Great, so what are your hopes for the future, personally but also thinking about what you hope for, for the Paralympic movement really?

SJ: I just want to carry on living my life now. It's hard now to be a normal inverted commas person because when you're athlete, and a world-class athlete, nothing's normal. You are in this bubble in this cocoon you've got stress. I just want to enjoy myself now. I've done twenty years of putting myself under the most stress you can ever be under. I want to still be involved in the Paralympics because it's something I believe in and it's something that I have been involved in all my life. So hopefully I've set the benchmark for doing the punditry and stuff in for Rio, for 2016.

I think for the Paralympic movement I just want to see it grow and grow and grow. You've got Oscar Pistorious – world superstar; David Weir – world superstar: these guys are as recognizable as Mo Farah and Jess Ennis. So I just want to see the Paralympics grow and get bigger and bigger and bigger. I don't want to hear people going on and on about the Olympics and Paralympics being ran at the same time. I want the Paralympics to run after the Olympics because the Paralympics are a world-class event in its own right. We don't have to latch ourselves onto the Olympics Games. The Paralympics are big enough now to stand alone and if I can be involved in the growing of the Paralympics and promoting it around the world and around Britain I would love to be involved in that because it's something I am passionate about, something I've done since I was a kid. I've never been shy of telling people I'm a Paralympian. I've never been shy of telling people I'm disabled. I'm not bothered. I am disabled but I am a world-class Paralympian and I hope in the future that the other countries do as good a job as we've just done in 2012 in Great Britain.

NY: And how would you say that attitudes have changed towards disabled people over the years?

SJ: Well, when I first started, people had never seen Paralympic sport and disability was sort of hidden away. Like I said now, we're sat here, it's 2012 and I go to a lot of schools and the biggest sport that the kids are doing in the school at the moment is wheelchair basketball. Schools have had to buy wheelchairs – these are people who can walk by the way, these are not people in wheelchairs. People who can walk want to play wheelchair basketball. Now that [interruption because of a bus going past]... Disability and disabled sport has grown immensely. When I first started people didn't really know what disabled sport was – disability wasn't as high profile. Now, I've done a lot of schools – we're in 2012 and we've just finished the Paralympic Games – and the biggest sport in the schools at the moment is wheelchair basketball. And that's not for people who are in wheelchairs; that's for people who can walk – they want to get into a wheelchair and play wheelchair basketball. So the biggest sport above football, cricket, rugby, at the moment in schools – they're having to buy wheelchairs. Now that says to me that disabled sport has made it, we have made it and the challenge we've got now is to keep making it. To keep drilling it home to people, keep showing people, keep it in the media, keep it in the media eye. Keep the role models who we've created, keep them in the spotlight so young disabled people and young able-bodied people can aspire to be the Sarah Storeys, the David Weirs, the Hannah Cockcrofts, Oscar Pistoriouses – these are world-class athletes and they're becoming superstars. I think that disabled people and the disabled

movement has only, it can only be good what has happened in 2012. There's nothing negative I can see after the Paralympic Games in 2012, it's all positive: people are not scared of disability any more, they have seen it on the TV. They have seen it on the TV: they've seen guys with one leg running, seen guys with one arm running, seen people swimming with no legs and no arms. People aren't scared any more about disability. People want to come up and talk to disabled people about their disability, about how they got involved in sport if they do sport. That's all good because disabled people are just like everybody else. It's just – I have bad eyes, they don't work very well – that's me only difference to anybody else. Everything else is exactly the same.

NY: I'm just thinking, is there something you wanted to say you haven't had a chance to say that you might want to say now?

SJ: Not really no. I think you covered my life there [laughter]

NY: Great

SJ: [pause] No, what do you think?

NY: All good.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]