

## Transcript of Interview with Sophie Christiansen

Date: Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2013

Interviewer: Catherine Turnbull-Ross

SC: "I got involved in Paralympic sport through the Riding for the Disabled Association when I was six years old. The physios at my primary school just happened to believe in the benefits of riding for kids with a disability so I went with my school every week to ride and immediately fell in love with horses and the freedom that they gave me because riding to me was much more fun and less boring than physio exercises on the floor. And I carried on for recreation and then at 13 I found South Bucks RDA group who specialise in making that transfer from therapy to sport riding. And it all happened really quickly. I just loved being able to compete in dressage, because I've always been quite sporty; at school I used to play hockey and football, so, for me, finding this sport that I could excel at was just beyond my wildest dreams. And then I started competing and loved it and got selected for the Athens Paralympic Games when I was just 16 years old, and I won a bronze medal very unexpectedly and everyone cried. And I just loved the experience that it gave me.

Since then I've become European and World Champion numerous times and then went to the Beijing Paralympics where I won 2 golds and a silver, and then to London where I won 3 gold medals."

Int: question about relationship with horse

"My relationship with my horse is very special especially when we take them to big competitions like the Paralympics. You know London 2012 was the biggest audience we'd ever seen and we couldn't replicate competing in front of 10,000 people beforehand. So I had to really make sure that my partnership with my horse was perfect and that he trusted me completely; so we went into that arena just like it was another training day and kind of ignored the people watching. And I think to be able to ride there's a connection between the horse and rider that you can't really describe. I think that's what makes me a good rider as I know intuitively what the horse wants me to do. So it is a sport unlike any other in that you're dealing with another being and the communication between the two has to be spot on."

Int: question about first visit to Paralympics in Athens

SC: "When I went to Athens I was so young and it really, really changed me as a person. I went to the Paralympic village and saw all these other disabled people who I had never seen before. And it really made me stop and think about myself, and seeing these people just get on with it. That really made me think about how I wanted to be perceived. And I was really shy and self-conscious before I went mainly due to my speech problems, but I had to talk to so many people, do so many interviews that it forced me out of my shell for the better really, because ever since then I've been really outgoing and never let anything stop me. So the whole experience at the Paralympics really changed my life."

Int: question about comparison with next games

SC: "With Beijing it was a really different games to Athens for me because, I was four years older, and being 21 years old, you really know by then the extent of the games. I went in as World & European Champion so I had a lot of pressure on me, unlike I had in Athens, so I really went to Beijing wanting to win gold, therefore it was more of a job and I took it a bit more seriously than I did when I was 16 – because you can imagine as a kid being in that environment, it's just mindblowing. So I really think it helped me then going into London having those two different experiences that I could draw on, because I knew what to expect and I was so focused when it came London and I think that's why I did so well."

Int: question about which was your best Paralympics

SC: "All three of my Paralympic experiences have been extremely different and I think definitely London would have been the best one, but I think I did learn from every one of my experiences. Athens was special because it was my first games and I didn't expect a medal and when I did it just changed my life. Beijing was special because I'd dreamt of winning a Paralympic gold medal all my life, and I did, by the time I was 21. But then London I really learnt so much from; to cope with the pressure of going in as reigning Paralympic champion, I took so much from that experience and I think Great Britain really showed the world how the Paralympics should be done and I hope it carries on."

Int: question about being part of the team

SC: "When I was younger and I just joined the team I was the big baby of the team, and all my team mates looked after me and I really looked up to them, because they were so professional in how they put themselves out there. They were friendly with the other nations, they knew that doing media was really important in raising the profile of Paralympic sport, so at that age it was really influential I learnt a lot from them on how to behave, not only in the sporting arena, but also outside as well, so I've got a lot to thank them for."

Int: question about how long you work with a horse before competition

SC: "The length of time that I work with my horses will vary. I'm quite a unique rider in that, because of my riding for the disabled background I used to get on any horse every week and just get the most out of the horse I was given, so that gave me a lot of skills as a rider in that I can adapt to any horse. Now I change them quite frequently; I used to borrow them from owners, so I never really knew when the owners would want them back so I used to have them for a year or two and then move onto the next one. Now, the horse I took to London he's my own horse which I bought - my first one - and I had him for about 14 months before the Games and that was perfect for him, because we managed to click just on time to be selected. Now with other horses that might have been different; it could have taken a shorter amount of time or a longer amount of time so it really depends on the horse."

Int: question about the best part of London for SC

SC: "My favourite experience from London - you can tell from the way I'm smiling - was my third competition when I had just finished my test and I kind of knew it was good enough to win a third gold medal even though I wait until the end of every class because you never know what could happen. But I came out of the arena and my brother and my two cousins stood out of the crowd,

bare-chested, and shouted 'We love you Sophie' and the whole crowd just erupted; 10,000 people cheering my name, it's something I'll never ever forget. So that was my favourite moment thanks to my brother."

Int: question about if her family are able to travel to watch or special in London

SC: "My family have travelled to watch me compete, pretty much at every major competition they come out and watch, which I'm really grateful for. I do like to distance myself from them a bit because I have a job to do and I don't want to be distracted. Normally my brother can't come as he's at school or at university, but in London he was actually a volunteer in Greenwich which was actually really quite weird seeing him about but it was really comforting at the same time. So I would catch up with him at times which really helped because it made me relax as it was more of a family thing than before, so that made it special as well."

Int: question about what's next

SC: "This year in 2013 we've got the Europeans in August in Denmark which I'm aiming for. We have a major championships every year, so next year is the Worlds in France, and then the Europeans again and then it will be Rio 2016. But I'll need another horse for that, because my horse will be a little too old by then and you never know what could happen with horses, so I'm not saying I'll definitely go but it'll be my aim and I'll try my best to get there and do what I did in 2012."

SC: "The Paralympic movement has really grown, even in the years that I've been involved. In Athens virtually all of the stands were empty, Beijing was better, but London, with record numbers of ticket sales, really showed just how much the Paralympic movement has come on. And I think that Britain has gone the right way about it. In this country the Paralympics are virtually treated the same as the Olympics, which you wouldn't get in any other country really. So I'm very lucky to be British in that I can be an athlete and not just a disabled person doing sport. So I hope that the London legacy will carry on to Rio. I think that will be the main test with the legacy, if we can carry it out in another country. I think there still can be some growth; I think Paralympic sport should be more mainstream on the TV, not just every 4 years, we compete every year. Nowadays you can watch athletics or cycling virtually any main events they have, so I would like to see that for the Paralympics too."

Int: question about younger people interested

SC: "I've had a lot of younger people come to me for advice on how to start. And I've heard from different groups and disabled clubs that their intake has been much higher since the Games. I still would like to see a bit more; I believe in the benefits of being fit as well. I think there was a danger for London that maybe disabled people saw Paralympians compete at an elite level and they might have thought 'I'll never really get to that level so I won't do sport at all'. Which for me doing sport really, really helped my disability; I believe that keeping fit has reduced the limitations I do have, so I can get out of the house, I can do stuff on my own, I can get a job as I'm fit enough to be able to. And I'd really like to see more disabled people just doing sport or going to the gym and get active and fit so that they can make the most out of life."

Int: question about profile of equestrian sport

SC: "I think equestrian in general, able-bodied and paralympian has really come to the forefront because all the teams at both the Olympics and Paralympics did so so well and I really believe that before it was seen as something people do on horses and not really seen as a sport. Whereas now I get people coming up to me and saying 'Oh you do that dancing on horses thing.' And I say 'yup'; I don't need to explain what dressage is anymore, because they know and I think that's really good for our sport. And I'd like to see more people getting involved because it's given me so much."