

## **Interview with Valerie Williamson at home 30<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

**Interviewer: Catherine Turnbull-Ross**

**Interviewer: "So, if you could just tell me a bit about your blazer"**

VW: "When I stopped shooting recurve I had a go at longbow so this badge is a British Longbow Archery Association badge. And these badges on the jacket; this one is the 2012 British team badge which I managed to acquire. The one below is my own club badge which is Newport Pagnell and then, in 2009, I was nominated by Bucks County to be the Archer of the Year, 2009 for my services to archery. This one is just marking the 150<sup>th</sup> of the Grand National Archery Association which is the parent body for archery.

**(Not recorded – but asked how did you start in the sport?)**

VW: "In the mid-1970s my husband and I were instrumental in setting up a disabled sports group in Northampton and the different sports organisations came and gave us the opportunity to have a go. I had a go at archery and I was bitten. That was in 1977. I went to Stoke Mandeville to the BSAD Sports with a group from Northampton and we got absolutely trounced. We thought we knew it all, but we got absolutely trounced across the patch. But I met people from Newport Pagnell archers and one of the well-known Bucks archers of the time, his comment was "Well, Williamson, who coaches you?". Coaching? What's coaching? "Come to Newport Pagnell, and we'll have a look at you.". That's the beginnings, 1978 I'd still got an invalid three- wheeler and I used to come backwards and forwards to Newport Pagnell and that, plus the encouragement I got from Don Gould Pauline Betteridge. Pauline is still about now, Don is long gone, unfortunately. That's how I came to get to the Paralympics in Arnhem in 1980."

**Interviewer: "So, would you like to tell us a bit about what happened in Arnhem?"**

VW:" Well, it was a totally new experience for me, because I'd never done anything like it before. I hadn't had that opportunity. I've been disabled from birth, so the opportunities when I was young weren't there. So, to be part of a team. We were billeted in the army camp at Arnhem and the Dutch made the British exceedingly welcome. I met some great people, I learnt a lot, and was fortunate in getting a Silver medal for archery and a Bronze medal for dart archery, which they don't do in competitions any more. So, that's my claim to fame with two Paralympic medals.

**Interviewer: "Would you like to show us your medals?"**

*Val holds up her two medals*

VW: "That's the Silver one, and that's the Bronze one."

**Interviewer: "What sort of interest was there in Paralympic Sport outside your group at that time?"**

VW: "Can I be very controversial? Some people were looking at us as those strange people who were trying to do things. And as the years have gone by the attitude towards people with a disability doing sport has totally changed. This is only my opinion, but when I started it was 'pat you on the

head, have a go'. Now, they're as good as the next and within archery as a sport, there's a number of county champions in the able-bodied, that are disabled athletes. And that is the difference.

VW: "There were a number of Paralympic archers in Buckinghamshire, and, at one time, they were County Champions, long before the acceptance as now. But, no, it was very much, 'pat you on the head, have a go'." ["Am I allowed to say that or are you going to cut that out.!"]

**Interviewer: "I understand that you met Poppa Guttman"**

VW: "Yes, my husband was also paraplegic and one has a medical to decide what level of disability you are, so you're competing in an even competition. So, we went down for the medical, and obviously Bernie was T5 para, no discussion. Then Poppa said to Bernard 'What's wrong with her?'. Bernard said, 'Well, she's been disabled from birth'. I was a miscarriage that lived; so therefore, it was brain damage, rather than spinal damage. Poppa's comment on that was, 'Well, we'll give her a medical and see where she fits.'. He was brilliant. He was so understanding. And he taught us so much in that twenty minutes. We realised prior to that we were green as grass. "

VW: "I married a paraplegic in 1962 and we were instrumental in forming a disabled sports club in Northampton, in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Then we decided we wanted to be competitive and this is how we came to be in contact with Stoke Mandeville. So, it was in 1977 that we first went to Stoke and that's where we met Poppa. Bernard was classified as a 'T5 incomplete para' and Poppa's comment was 'What's wrong with her?'. To which Bernard replied, 'Well, she's been disabled from birth, and her disability is brain damage rather than spinal damage.' Poppa's answer was 'Let's give you a medical and see, because the effect is lower limb paralysis'. So therefore I got a paralympic rating of L1.

And Bernard and I joined SPAC, which is Stoke Paraplegic Athletic Club. I'm not sure if its even in existence now. And we had many, many happy hours down there. Every fortnight we'd go down there on a Saturday afternoon and stay in the old huts in the old hospital. Sheep and goats, men in one hut, women in the other hut. But it was brilliant; and we got to know a lot of really inspiring people, and it gave us the encouragement to see others, which you didn't get that chance very often.

And, it was in 1980 that I first got the chance to go to the Paralympics. That was through Don Gould who used to run the archery training, and Pauline Betteridge who was a physio, and I think is still connected with the organisation now. "

**Interviewer: "Valerie, you also attended the Barcelona Paralympics, can you describe what that was like?"**

VW: "That's right. Totally different from 1980 in as much as there were far more countries competing, the format of the competition had evolved, and we had spectators. So, therefore, we had noise, which was a new experience for me. I was used to shooting in, not total silence, but in quiet; whereas the spectators were noisy. Not when you were actually shooting, but between shots. So, it was different; and the way people treated you was different. The whole idea of 'oh, dear, let them try' this was changing, and they were accepting us more as athletes. And of course,

this has changed more and more over the years, until this year the attitude is ‘they’re athletes with a disability instead of a disabled person trying to be an athlete’.”

VW: “Over the years, the actual format of the competition in archery has changed. In 1980, because I was a new international athlete I only did the shorter distance, which was ‘short metric’.”  
[at this point, telephone rings & recording stops]

VW: “The Opening Ceremony in Barcelona, was dramatic. I’ve got some photographs of that. It had just grown. More countries, more sports, more disabilities being recognised; so that from a small beginning, and look at this year.”

VW: “As a retired Paralympian I was offered a free ticket to go to the London Paralympics. I went to the Excel with my niece’s husband and we had a fantastic day, watching sitting volleyball, fencing, table tennis. So, we were actually there when the British teams won some medals. And it was wild; the noise was incredible. I also bought tickets to go to Woolwich Arsenal and watch the archery. The format of the competition had changed.”

VW: “When I was competing we used to do a Double FITA over 4 days which was 4 different distances. The format now is twofold. They do an elimination round where they just shoot at 70 metres and then they have a shoot-off – again at 70 metres. So the whole pressure has changed. In the days when I was doing it you needed stamina, now you need bottle. It’s much more spectator-orientated in the modern format, and presumably that’s part of why they changed it, although I don’t think I’d want to do it.”

VW: “Although I retired from international competition in 1994, I’m still involved in my local archery club, which is Newport Pagnell Archers; arranging tournaments, and participating (not competing) a little bit. I’m also on Bucks County Committee and I arrange County tournaments so I’m still in touch with what’s going on.”