

Interview with Martin McElhatton

Stoke Mandeville Stadium, 6 February 2013, Jon Newman interviewer

How important was sport when you were growing up

Like many young people I did lots of different sports: played football, did a bit of running, played rugby, cricket... everything at school and I was probably average at everything. So in terms of sport I enjoyed sport, I was enthusiastic, someone who joined in with everything. I suppose that all changed after I had my spinal cord injury. I was training to be an aircraft engineer for British Airways up at Heathrow Airport and one morning on the way to work I was on my bicycle and got run over by a lorry. That ended up with me paralysed from the waist down so eventually I ended up at the spinal unit at Stoke Mandeville and that's really the first time I got introduced to wheelchair sport and tried lots of different things like archery and did some swimming and table tennis – which was all great for building your core stability and helping with your balance which is really important as someone with a spinal cord injury.

But I suppose the thing that I enjoyed most was the wheelchair basketball and it wasn't really until I had left hospital and met up with an old friend who I had gone through rehab with, and he said he'd joined a basketball team and I said, "Well, can I come along?" So I went along to the club. The chairs were very different in those days; it was 1980 and there were a few sports chairs but the majority of people were playing in converted or adapted NHS chairs with cut-down backs and the footplates welded or bolted together. So I went along and it felt like I was at one end of the court when everyone else was fast and down the other end, but I pretty soon caught on and really knew that from day one that it was an exciting sport and something that I was keen to be involved in - and that was really how I got into wheelchair sport. It was at Leighton Buzzard at the time, not far from here. It was a fun time and we were enthusiastic; and from that I joined another team, the LGS Jets who were based here at Stoke Mandeville - there were two teams. So by that time I'd got my first sports wheelchair which was so exciting to have a chair because then you could get up and down the court with everybody else and you felt part of the team. They weren't the light chairs they are now; they were a sort of aluminium chairs, very dated they would look now, but they were really effective and enabled you to play the sport to a much higher level.

So this idea of having a special chair for your sporting activity was beginning in the 1980s?

Absolutely and that really did transform the sport. As more and more people got sports chairs – and eventually they started being imported from the States – and then we were able to play the sport to a much higher level because you were more proficient in your chair, rather than trying to play the sport in a chair that was almost fighting against you, you were using a piece of equipment that was enabling you to perform to your best – probably not as they do today, but by comparison to the old NHS folding chairs it was a very big step forward at that time. There was a British guy called Vinny [Ross?]. I had one of his chairs to start with and then I got a chair called a Quadra from America, then I had a Quickie from America and then I had a series of Quickies and then we went back to British chairs because they had improved a lot and a company called RGK had come on the market by then – and they are the suppliers to the GB team so one of the top names in wheelchair

basketball chairs. But for me I had a range of chairs over the years; the important thing was that it fitted you and it was set up for your disability so it gave you the best balance to play and do the things on the court that you wanted to do whether it was pushing, turning – and that's why with the camber in the wheels it helped the chairs to turn but it also lowered the centre of gravity so it made the chairs more inherently stable, so as they got lighter that enabled you to go a bit faster (although I was never really that fast – fast of mind maybe)

How did the club system feed into the National Games and the GB team?

In those days there weren't a huge amount of teams around the country; we played in the National League; I think there were two divisions; we started off in the second division and because we were a relatively young group of players we did very well and got promotion. We then went into the first division which was the National Leagues. So we were travelling all over the country; we'd go up to Scotland for the week end to play matches, or up to the North-West – all over the place; there were also cup competitions as well. But each year the big competition was the national games here at Stoke Mandeville. So when we joined the LGS Jets based here at the stadium we had two teams, both in the first division of the National League, but the LGS Jets 2 team got to the final of the Nationals and we competed against our no. 1 team. We didn't do so well; we got hammered by our own team, which was a bit of a lesson really. After that some of us decided to form our own club and we set up a club in Milton Keynes called the Aces; that was in 1984 and that was the year I got selected for the Paralympics here at Stoke Mandeville to be in the wheelchair basketball team. I'd been in a couple of under-23 teams, one to Italy, one to Holland and that had given me an opportunity to show that I could play at a good level and I think they were looking to bring some young players through into the team in the 80s, so a few of us got a chance to be in the 84 team, which was of course not going to be at Stoke Mandeville but ended up here.

What was Stoke Mandeville 1984 like?

The initial thing was the joy of selection. It was a bit of a surprise really, we'd been in the squads and training but I certainly didn't think I was going to get picked; then to get the letter to be picked was something amazing and to think that you were going to be going off to America – as it was then – to Champaign Illinois for the Paralympic Games! We were planning a trip afterwards and going on a bit of sight -seeing, all of that; we'd got our minds set, thought we'll have fantastic training, fantastic competition and then go and do some travelling... But then of course that all changed and we took part in the games here in Stoke Mandeville. That in itself was incredible: to be training here and then competing in the games here and that family and friends could come and watch and particularly family and friends who'd supported me five years earlier through probably the most traumatic thing in my life.

How did the GB Basketball team perform?

I think we came a glorious seventh! And I didn't get to play a huge amount; I did a lot of warming up. For me it was about being a part. I'm a great team person and being part of that team was great fun. We stayed in the William Harding school which is a junior school about 150 yards away from the stadium here and we had some adventures there as well, which was quite interesting, 'cos obviously it wasn't designed for adults, so all the toilets were low; we were sleeping in classrooms that just

had beds in. It was all a bit bizarre really, but it was a great experience. And then of course after you'd finished competing there was the beer tent and everybody went in. It was very social as well as being competitive. I think the Paralympics is very professional now, but there's always that fellowship and senses of camaraderie that exists in the Paralympic movement.

A lot of people have made that comparison with the social nature of the games back in the 70s and 80s and contrasted it with the professionalism today. Do you think something has been lost there or is it all gain?

I think it's just different and different eras. I don't think it's a negative. I think the athletes have great opportunities now particularly funding so they can train and they've got the teams around them. If you 'ld said Sports Science to us that was probably eating a banana after training. We did weight training, but we didn't know why we were doing it we did it just to be stronger and fitter. We didn't have a strengthening and conditioning programme as they do now that's all measured and accounted for. There's a lot of pressure on the athletes now and I don't think we probably felt as much pressure because it was perhaps more enjoyable, perhaps more social. But when we got on the court it was no less fierce and no less competitive – and I think that hasn't been lost. I think what went before just leads to what is now; and for me the Paralympics of today are an amazing spectacle of top-level sport, and that's what they should be. There are many opportunities for social sport at different levels all the way through the pyramid of sport, so people who want to play socially can play socially. For me, I played wheelchair basketball, but also wheelchair tennis and the sports are both very social and many of my friends are in sport. That doesn't have to change just because you are an elite sports person, I think if you ask many of the top athletes now many of their friends would come from sport.

Presumably one of the things that has changed is the funding and support. When you went to Scotland were you self-funding?

Yes, we raised money, we did we did fund-raising things, all sorts of silly things. We pushed from Stoke Mandeville to Luton as I recall one day to raise money for the club to fund the programme of activities whether it was training or matches. We paid subs and we tried to make as much go as far as we could. And of course none of us were paid, even when we were representing Great Britain there was no payment for playing in terms of like the World Class Performance Programme. We received expenses maybe for travelling to the GB training sessions, petrol and so on, and the accommodation and catering was paid for while you were at the training, so that was about the size of it. Of course if you got selected for a trip (fortunately enough I was in the European championships in 1987 and the World Championships in 1986 in Australia) so those trips were funded. But really outside of that it was very much down to your own efforts to do your training programme. I went to the local sports centre near where I live in Luton and negotiated that I paid £1 and I could train for as long as I liked when they had a free court. That was £1 when £1 meant a lot. [That was your own initiative?] Yes, I wanted to get better; and three of us had a fitness programme that we did; because we couldn't get a basketball court we rented a space in a sports centre that was just a hall with a quite a low roof (I remember it was pretty dark in there) and we just did pushing up and down for two hours on a, I think it was a Tuesday, night. And that got us in shape to get playing representing Great Britain, which wouldn't have happened, I don't think, if we hadn't have been as fit.

What was the support in terms of coaching and training?

Well the support was great. We had a fantastic coach in 1984, a chap called David Reid and he'd come from able-bodied basketball, so he was bringing fresh ideas in and I think for the young players that was quite exciting; he was challenging the ideas about how to play. I think coaches tended to be either past players or people that had been around the clubs supporting so there wasn't the level of coaching or knowledge that there is now and obviously coaching courses have been developed and you've got different techniques now – video analysis and all of that that can look at techniques for shooting and how you do certain things in a sport like basketball or tennis. And you look across the sports at the technology that's used particularly for coaches, being able to analyse the performance of players and then give that feedback to the player or athlete to then improve their performance. I think that's changed. Then you look at Sports Science in terms of measuring performance, that has changed beyond all recognition in terms of being able to understand how to train, when to rest, what kind of training to do to peak for an event and so on. So the coaching has really developed and the support mechanism around it. It's very much a team approach; and for any athlete to be successful you need that team [approach] particularly in the modern Paralympic movement.

What were the innovations that your coach introduced in 1984?

I think it was just the tactics of playing as a team and being able to move the ball and move the person so you create space. He also introduced certain kinds of practices that enabled us to perform better in matches. They didn't always work (laughs) but I think the benefits came later on for the GB team when they really started to perform in the late-80s and the 90s when the GB team was very successful and I think that stemmed back to some of those more professional approaches to training and those practices that were brought in.

Something other players from the 70s have talked about is that on occasion the quite extraordinary levels of violence and aggression in the game then. Did you have similar experiences?

The rules of basketball are that it is non-contact but you know, that's taken with the caveat of that it's a physical sport and it's played by and large by young men and women who want to be physically active and it's competitive. So you put all of that in the mix and every now and then there's going to be a little bit of aggression shown and I think so long as it's within the rules and the referees are there to call the fouls/. So yes, it happens and to be honest it wasn't probably as prevalent as it had been a decade before and I think certainly the sport I played was very enjoyable but also very exhilarating in terms of the buzz that you got from playing; and for me it was the one thing that made me feel free in the chair, that I could be doing something, that you are almost forgetting your disability and concentrating on the activity that you are doing, whether it was playing basketball or tennis; I was free from thoughts about being disabled I suppose.

Where did your professional basketball playing go after the 86 World and 87 European championships?

Well in 1988 the Paralympics were in Seoul in Korea; I was very excited at hoping to be in the team; I trained really hard and got down to the last 16 in the selection process. And then I got cut; and it was tough, I was really gutted because I really thought I was good enough to go. But obviously, it's competitive and you can only take 12 players - or you could only take 12 players in those days – so

from that point of view you were always competing against someone who was your points classification in basketball. So, I had to take that on the chin and decide what I was going to do. I still wanted to go to Korea and fortunately the British Paralympics Sport Society (which is now WheelPower) wanted someone to go out and send some press-releases back about the GB team, because this was pre- the British Paralympic Association and each disability organisation selected part of the GB team, so the wheelchair sports were selected by t what is WheelPower now and they joined together with the other teams from the other disability groups to form the Great Britain team. So I went out and covered the wheelchair sports and interviewed people and sent faxes back (no emails in those days) just on results and things and when I came back...

[Interruption]

So I went out to Korea and covered the games for the organisation I sent faxes back because there were no emails in those days and took some photographs and so on; and the aim was really to try and promote the team and the games and raise awareness back t home. So when I came back the organisation asked me if I wanted to carry on as a part-time press officer and so I did that. And really that was my affiliation and how I came to work at Stoke Mandeville. 26 years later I am still working at Stoke Mandeville; I've done a range of different things right from that press role which I did for a long time, to fund raising, to being involved in helping organise sports events and for the last x number of years I've been the Chief Executive

Were you the first Chief Executive of WheelPower with impairment?

I am not aware of anyone else who had impairment. Someone did say to me the other day I've got Guttman's job, because he obviously used to run the stadium here and run the charity and he set up the organisation in the beginning – but I think he was doing much more, because he was also running the international side of things, you know, the Paralympic Games, so I think I'm probably only doing part of what he did. But it's for it even to be considered that you have taken on that mantle to carry the movement on forward, particularly here at Stoke Mandeville.

Working for the organisation over that period of time, what changes have you seen in the way that wheelchair sport is perceived and how that feeds into the Paralympics?

I think there have been huge changes both in ho the games are perceived, but also how wheelchair sport in particular is viewed. I think it started with things like the London Marathon and having the wheelchair race in the London marathon, much more visibility; then people started to see the change in the chairs and so on. I mean you now look at the performance of athletes like David Weir in marathon racing and...Incredible that he can do a marathon in an hour and a half – which is staggering really. To think that the marathon was only included in the Paralympic Games in 1984. So that's come a long way very quickly. And I think just the exposure and media interest. Back in the day when I was doing the press here at Stoke Mandeville there was some interest, and it was usually human interest, rather than about the sport. Then eventually you got one or two organisations, particularly the BBC and the Daily Telegraph, who focused on the sports aspect and then started to cover the games as sport and were looking for projects in between the games and kept a regular feed on wheelchair sport and disability sport as it grew.

People have commented on the changing interest of the BBC. Have you experienced that growth of interest?

Oh definitely, and you look at the coverage in 2012 by Channel 4 and its amazing the in-depth analysis that they went to, having experts who came from the sport, having different kind of coverage, looking all different angles to make sure that the sports were presented in the best way possible and I think it went very much from being human interest and “Isn’t this fascinating that these disabled people can play sport!” to “Look at these athletes. Meet the super-humans” That’s the tag line that I suppose completes the journey from just how far we’ve come from. Almost I suppose, pity for these disabled people who are trying to overcome their trauma of life in a wheelchair or life with a disability to now celebrating athletic performance and incredible athletes and tremendous ambassadors for sport.

What do you think Sir Ludwig Guttmann would have made of that?

I think he’d have been quite pleased; I think he’d be proud of where it’s come to and the journey that it’s been on. He started something here at Stoke Mandeville, it’s grown and went off round the world; and in 2012 it came back home and it could not have gone better. I don’t think anyone could have envisaged the Paralympic Games or the movement being at the level it was ...having the opportunity to see that first hand, I think it was just an incredible event and I think he would have been rightly proud of the thing that he started being taken to its ultimate fruition

WheelPower is still based in Stoke Mandeville. Do you think that is still a significant location for your organisation?

I think Stoke Mandeville is important. In any sports movement it’s important to know where your roots are and whether that’s rugby at Twickenham, cricket at Lords, tennis at Wimbledon, all of that is celebrated and the heritage of sport is very important. It gives us a foundation to build on and to tell the athletes of today that they are part of something bigger than just themselves, they are part of a whole sports movement that started on the lawns of the hospital and has grown to be this incredible event every two years – whether its winter Paralympics or summer Paralympics – where all the athletes of the world who are the top athletes with their impairment gather together and compete on the world’s stage. I think for me knowing that I’m part of that journey and that whole story of Paralympics Sport and that I am a Paralympian, a proud Paralympian, is something that is very important. But it’s also about using the power of the Paralympics to inspire other people, whether its young children who have disabilities or its people who are new to disability, who maybe have a spinal cord injury today., it’s inspiring them to see sport as a way to stay fit and healthy but also that they can have the potential to excel and compete if that’s what they want to and that there is a pathway for them into sport at the highest level on an equal terms with Olympic athletes.