

## Transcript of filmed interview with Tanni Grey Thompson, July 2011

Paralympic sport has defined my whole life. I started doing sport at 7. My parents thought it was important for me to be fit and healthy and then through school, I started entering competitions.

I went to Stoke Mandeville for the first time in 1982 and for me to go there was amazing. To be in the dorms as a 12 year old is the most exciting thing ever - not so much when you get older – but it was a great experience being there in a junior competition. From then, that's when I thought about the Paralympics. I remember watching the 1984 Olympics with the likes of Seb Coe and Ed Moses and thinking 'That is what I want to do!' Four years after that in 1988 was my first Paralympic Games that I competed at. I never thought that my Paralympic career would ever lead to the House of Lords, but everything that I learnt, that I did, has contributed to who I am.

[Thinking back to your first time at Stoke Mandeville, did you ever think you could be a Paralympian?](#)

I knew at 12 that I wanted to be a Paralympic champion, but I wasn't entirely sure that I could, because although I was good at athletics, I wasn't the best. The best girl in Britain went to my school, which was pretty miserable – I didn't win much! But I remember beating her in our last year together when I was 16, and at that point I thought 'If I can beat her, then who else can I beat?' and by that time I was in a better club – a mainstream athletics club – I was training and every decision I made was around me wanting to be an athlete, so I went to Loughborough University for sport and it all started slotting into place.

The big step for me was making Seoul in 1988. Realistically I was probably one of the last members of the team to be selected – I was right at the bottom of the list. That gave me good experience, being with the GB team. We were all gathered at Stoke Mandeville before we went and seeing the whole team together in their track suits, travelling as a team and also after the Games we came back to Stoke, and that was really special.

Stoke has been there for not just every step of my life athletically, but I celebrated my 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays there, and most of my wedding anniversaries. Stoke Mandeville is still central to most things we do in the sport.

[Do enough people in the world know about this special place, Stoke Mandeville, and in particular, the hospital?](#)

I don't think enough people do know about it. I think the naming of the mascot Mandeville has been amazing. That's really helped people to understand. If you look at Stoke Mandeville and the rehab movement, what Guttmann did there through the Second World War – sport was an amazing tool. It's hard to think that in the 40's there wasn't any

disability sport, nobody knew anything about it. He (Guttmann) created this movement and it's important to remember history, but also to remember how far we've come. In the 40's and 50's wheelchair racing wasn't invented as a sport. Lots of doctors and nurses felt that paraplegics shouldn't do wheelchair racing because it was taxing on the body. There are pictures of the early days of a 100 yards race with doctors and nurses being on the finish line in case the poor patients have passed out! A rapid transition to the 80's with marathon racing and all sorts of other things and the sport developed quickly.

[You were an incredible athlete in that you won everything going. Is there any one performance you look back on and think 'That was my best ever'?](#)

My best ever race was the 100m final in Athens. My 800m was unbelievably bad. A split second decision – the wrong one – put me in a wrong position and just everything went bad and everyone around me was saying 'Is it a Games too far?' and that's what should have been said. And to come back and win the 100 was, for me, the best race I've ever done in my life and the one I'm happiest with, relieved with. In my whole career I probably lost more races than I won.

[If you could have said something to Guttmann, what would it be?](#)

If I could say anything to Sir Ludwig, it would be 'Thank you' because at the time he was creating the disability sports movement there was so little value around disabled people. Before he did his rehab work at Stoke, if you broke your back or neck, you were left in hospital to die. It was that simple. You might have gone home, but you had no life expectancy, you weren't expected to contribute or do anything at all. The stuff he did started to change the way that disabled people were perceived and then other people were able to build on that. But without him (and, in a bizarre way, the Second World War) we wouldn't have had the kind of rights that disabled people now have.

When I was growing up, even at the age of 7 or 8, you didn't really see disabled people out and about on the street. Education was segregated, and a lot of disabled people were living in homes and they just weren't around. Sport helped to change that – sport plus legislation brought disabled people out. The Paralympic movement has done so much to change other people's view of disability and that's been amazing. For me, years on in the House of Lords, (I'm not sure anyone thought I'd end up here) I didn't want to be locked away, I wanted to be out and working and doing sport. It's really important to keep fighting for these things. I know a lot has been achieved but there's still a lot that we have to do to make sure disabled people aren't side-lined and ignored.

Sir Ludwig Guttmann has left an enormous legacy and the fact that we still have the stadium at Stoke Mandeville regenerated, there are lots of young people coming though and it's important to remember everything he did and the battles he fought and that he just didn't give up. I would have loved to have met him. I'm sure he was stubborn and awkward and

never stopped, just kept going and going, because it was something that he believed in and I think we can all learn from that. He would have been really proud to see the work that he started – in London 2012 we will have an amazing Paralympic Games and it's down to one person and everything that he did!

[Looking back to your very first Paralympic Games in Seoul, not a lot of people in Korea knew very much about disability, let alone in sport, how was your experience?](#)

To go to Korea was amazing because it was such a big step up and to be with the team was incredible. But nobody really knew the term 'Paralympics' in Korea. It was kind of 'rent-a-crowd'! The same people came every day to watch and they supported different countries every day!

Even back home, we knew about it, but it wasn't particularly important in the press or the media. There was a programme on the BBC about 6 weeks later which mostly talked about the Irish Boccia team, not about our performances. It was exciting to be there, but we felt as if we were really at the start of something that nobody really knew anything about.

[Was Barcelona in 1992 better in that respect?](#)

Barcelona was a massive step up (from Seoul in 1988) because the media got behind it and so we had newspaper journalists out there, we had BBC coverage – one of my races was shown on Grandstand! As an athlete, you kind of think 'I've made it!' My mother was really disappointed because I spat some water out on the track and she never forgave me for that! But there was stuff in the papers every day and for me as an athlete going there and winning, that was great. It felt that people started to know what the Paralympic movement was about: it followed on from the Olympics and it was about sport and we felt that people were bothered.

[You carried on winning from then on really but what about the USA in 1996?](#)

Atlanta was really weird as a Games. We expected it to be a step up from Barcelona and if you look at the support that American athletes had in terms of university scholarships, road racing and disability rights legislation is amazing in the States.

But nobody really cared about the Paralympics. All the baseball matches that hadn't been on during the Olympics got scheduled during the Paralympics and nobody really came to watch. Although there was good media coverage, it was disappointing that there wasn't a huge amount of interest in the Games – it felt like the Games had stalled a bit and what should have been an amazing opportunity to push on just fell a bit flat. It didn't help that the British Olympic team didn't have a great time, but for the British Paralympic team it wasn't a huge amount of fun to be at.

Paralympic Games number 4 was in Australia – specifically Stadium Australia, this magnificent edifice, right in the middle of their Olympic Park. How did that compare to the United States?

Sydney was brilliant in that Australians ‘got’ sport. They understood the Paralympics and there was a huge amount of support for their Paralympic athletes. I think they struggled with spectators just because of how far away Australia was. It meant that a lot of British families had second thoughts about going. But in terms of the way the Games was organised, it was brilliant. It was exactly the same as the Olympics – they’d really thought long and hard about what they were doing for the Paralympic movement, and that felt like another turning point in moving the Games forward.

Athens 2004 – the land of the ‘big curbs’ on the pavements.....

Athens was a complete shock as a Games actually. Everyone had read the press leading up to it about whether the facilities were going to be built and whether the accommodation was going to be ready, and a lot of us were quite nervous. If they were struggling to do it for the Olympics, what would happen with the Paralympics? Because there was always the fear that we would be some sort of afterthought. But actually everything was built, it was finished, and it was much better than we expected. Although, as soon as you went out into the city of Athens, there were curbs like that (indicates up to shoulder height with hand!). People weren’t used to seeing disabled people on the streets – they certainly weren’t used to seeing disabled athletes, so it was a split Games. In terms of medal success it was good, in terms of TV coverage it was great, but it’s going to be interesting what their legacy of their Games was: actually wasn’t it about providing long term support for disabled athletes? It was probably more about getting the rail system right, and getting their electricity system right? It wasn’t about venues or sport.

In Beijing you weren’t competing, you were commentating and I remember walking down a street with you after dinner and getting some very strange looks from people.

(Laughs) Beijing was really weird, in the sense that the understanding of disability wasn’t really ‘there’. I’d have people coming up to me and poke me, looking at me and my daughter who’s blonde and blue-eyed and that created a huge storm, because it’s not usual for disabled women in China to have children, so that was interesting... But the Games themselves were amazing, Although China was top of the medal table in Athens, their sports development programme wasn’t across the whole of China, it was very focused on the Greater Beijing area, about selecting people and training them up and the fact that lots of people came to watch the Games was amazing. So the atmosphere for the athletes was unbelievable, but I think for me the funniest moment (well I’m not sure funniest is the right word) was the crash in the Women’s 5000m with people across the track. People didn’t know how to react to that – there was a crowd of people down near where it happened, that stood up and applauded! No! That’s not what you’re meant to do!

But the fact that people were there made the TV shots look great, and people started to recognise the Paralympics in a different way. Which puts a whole pile of pressure on London, but I don't think that's a bad thing!

If Ludwig Guttmann could have been at the closing ceremony at Beijing in the Birds' Nest Stadium, with hundreds of thousands of spectators, a record number of competitors and then looked forward to going to London, what do you think he might have said about the movement he started?

I don't think Sir Ludwig would have even imagined back then (I don't think anyone would) that we would have got this far. I think if he stood looking at the Closing Ceremony of the Paralympics, he might have thought he was at the Olympics, not the Paralympics. I don't think there's a better time for London to be hosting the Games because the bid for London was always about the Olympics AND the Paralympics, never about the Olympics and 'something that was going to come after' which other cities have done. They are going to put the Paralympics on the map in a way that no other country will be able to back off from ever again. So it's a really exciting time, not just for disability sport, but the disability movement, and the Games that follow are going to have a huge amount to live up to!

It takes a special individual to do what you've done – not many of the population able-bodied or otherwise will be able to experience that. Put yourself in the position back to being on the start line, what was special about that experience for you?

What was special was about competing for GB – that was always what I wanted to do and win medals. I used to get so nervous, I used to throw up before every single race I did which wasn't great for the team around me – they were lucky if it was only once! They used to walk away from me on the warm up track saying 'Oh look, she's gone green, let's move away!'

But for me, most of my career was about fear of failure. I didn't want to be bad or have bad races. That's what made me train really hard and that's what made me compete. Wanting to be the best I could and when I didn't want to do that anymore, literally I woke up one day and said 'This is not for me anymore, there's other things I want to do, I don't want to spend the rest of my life training.' That was a big change in me, but my career was always about competing for GB, so few athletes get to compete for GB and lots of friends who didn't make the team or got their times wrong and didn't peak at the right time and you have so little chance to achieve that you have to give it everything you can. My Paralympic career, if you add up all the time on track competing in 5 Games, adds up to about nineteen and a half minutes – not very long! That's the other thing that made me train really hard was knowing that I had this limited time to achieve what I wanted to.

Can you look back now on your athletic career with 100% satisfaction?

I look back on my athletic career and think 'It was fine, it was ok.' There are a few more races I would have liked to have won. My husband was also an athlete and I would have loved to have beaten him. I never quite did! He always said if I did, he would retire and I probably would have retired as well! I don't spend a lot of time looking back because there's always so much more that I want to do, but if I do, I always think that I was hugely privileged to compete for GB. That started at Stoke Mandeville with lots of people who offered me help and support and training camps, and it was actually the most amazing experience of my life.

[Would you recommend any youngster thinking about the possibility of competing in a sport and maybe entering the Paralympic Games, what would you say?](#)

For a very young athlete who wants to be involved in the sport – just do it! To compete as an elite athlete you have a very limited time. I was so lucky that I kept going. I was injury-free until the last 2 months of my career and that made a big difference. But don't be afraid to put yourself in the spotlight. What's the worst that can happen? It's only sport, nobody dies! But if it goes right, you can have the best time of your life.

[Did your career make you smile?](#)

That's a really tough question! My career made me smile when I finished. Not while I was doing it. I was too driven, too focused and too obsessed, too much of a complete pain in the neck to live with! But when I stopped it was ok!