

Interview with Tara Flood at her home made 1st February 2013

Interviewer Jon Newman

Can you talk about the significance that sport had for you and how and why you first got interested?

I went to a residential segregated special school at 16 months, so very, very young; the school was down in East Sussex, the school's still there and they had their own swimming pool. There was a real focus on all the kids learning to swim, whether that was about because the school was involved in junior swimming opportunities or whether or not they saw it as therapy – it was probably a combination of the two – so I remember vaguely being thrown into the swimming pool when I was, I would say, three or maybe younger. And there really was this sense of, "Right, has she come to the surface?" It's a kind of a get-on-and-do-it, which nowadays in terms of health and safety would be pooh-poohed, I'm sure. That was the same for me and all of my friends at school; there was a real focus on being able to swim but also to engage in a whole range of other sports too. It was a highly competitive school, and looking back, I suppose I didn't think about it at the time because I was horribly competitive, I am still to some degree, but not quite as bad as I was when I was much younger.

So I learnt to swim very early and the school, as I said before, were very hooked-into BSAD (British Sports Association for the Disabled) Junior Swimming Sports Opportunities, so we went up to Stoke Mandeville to compete when I was still at school and that was the time when Stoke Mandeville was still housing us in what - I think they used to call them mission huts or something - great big long almost like aircraft hangars and they were just some sort of horrific hospital-like looking room, but in many ways when you're young you don't really clock that - and if your experience of school, which was my dominant experience at that time, had similar dormitories, then actually, it's only when I look back that I think, that was very odd. It was just open to the elements, there was this great big door at the end that just pulled back and there must have been 30 or 40 of us. But they were great times because you're in among your friends, you're meeting lots of new people similar ages and what you have in common is swimming.

I think from memory it just used to be swimming and then as I got older it used to be swimming on one day and then sports on another – or they sometimes combined - but I never at any kind of regional or national level competed in anything other than swimming. I did have a bit of a go at a couple of field things, but I think you know when you find your thing, your niche, and swimming was always that from me. The school in many ways were actually very supportive, for all of its faults they were very supportive of any of us that were into sport. The school had two houses, so the pupils were split into two groups and across the summer and sometimes in the winter they used to split sports events by the houses, competition between the two houses.

So that was at school, and then when I was heading towards leaving school (I left school just before my 16th birthday) and probably then thought, because I was returning home to the North West, I had no connections other than my parents lived there, no community contacts, no swimming contacts. I think I did worry at the time how I was going to stay connected and it was probably just fortunate that a couple of friends who had left the previous year had then got themselves into the Les Autres

Sports Association. At the time disability sports broadly were split into a number of different impairment categories, so CP Sport, British Blind Sport etc., etc. For those of us who didn't fit into any of the other categories we were in the Les Autres Sports Association - Les Autres, French for "The Others" – and lots of people that had come through from school were there; they'd moved on into adult life; so I was just moving on to another level really. And great times really because that then opened up for me not only the continuing national swimming galas, but that's where I first started to experience international competition. I think from memory my first competition was straight into the deep end, so to speak, with the International Games for the Disabled in New York. So I left school in 1983 and because I'd been competing at Nationals it doesn't feel quite so weird that I jumped straight from school into an international competition because I was swimming all the time – even at school I was swimming at every opportunity I could: always at weekends and certainly one or twice a week. And then when I returned home I connected into the British Les Autres Sports Association and then I can't remember what month the 1984 games were [I think it was July] Yes I remember it being very hot in New York anyway. As I said before, there was all that controversy about Los Angeles refusing to host the Paralympics and then that strange split between Stoke Mandeville for wheelchair-using athletes and everybody else it seems, from memory. So you can imagine, what was I, just seventeen, thrown into international competition but, more importantly, meeting disabled people from everywhere in the world. Not as huge as the Paralympics are now, but at the time it felt massive, absolutely massive. Because it feels like such a long time ago I don't remember a huge amount about the competition – probably tells you more about me – I do remember more about the social life than anything – I think probably because still in 1984 swimming even at international level, didn't feel the same level of professionalism maybe elitism as it was only four years later in Seoul and then much more so in Barcelona. In many ways we swam in New York and competed in New York (and I think I got a bronze medal) but it felt for me as a very, very young 17 year-old much more than that.

How old were you when you first went to Stoke Mandeville?

I think I was probably in my very early teens, so maybe 13. I couldn't have been much older because I remember going to Stoke Mandeville two or three times with the PE Teacher, a relatively small group of us, I'd say maybe six or seven, but we all kind of like grouped together in these enormous Nissan huts type thing. Going back to Stoke Mandeville much later as an adult and competing at BSAD adult swimming galas, Stoke Mandeville was a very different character [then] I mean they had the huge refurb, Nissan huts gone and then that very smart – although it still felt very hospital I always felt, somehow smelt of hospital - but that very smart new accommodation area. I imagine now they've rebuilt the pool because it was quite a manky pool when I look back and it was only 25 metre, I presume it's still 25 metre, because it doesn't really need to be anything more because thankfully now and even when I was competing, other sports swimming pools that were 50 metres were becoming much more accessible to disabled swimmers – well for disabled people who wanted to use them for leisure reasons too - but for those of us at competition level, I remember just before going to Barcelona, it was all very revolutionary.

There was a real desperation for the Paralympics squad to start to make connections with the Olympics squad; and I always felt with swimming – and I would say this wouldn't I – felt that it was much more reaching out to mainstream (for want of a better word) than other sports. I don't know why that was. Was it because we were quite a young sport, I don't know? But either way prior to

Barcelona I remember going to an Olympic training camp at Crystal Palace. It was still fairly segregated; we were able to socialise with the Olympic athletes, but that was still very difficult because they were still very much – and it's really true of disabled and non-disabled athletes - sometimes when you have no experience of each other you need some kind of intentional building of relationship activity; there has to be a way for the two groups to come together. I remember when I left segregated school and returned to mainstream life (I went to mainstream FE college up in Blackpool near where my parents lived at the time) and I remember not speaking to another person, God, it probably wasn't six months but it felt like a very long time, not because I didn't want to but because I had no idea what to say - I also had a southern accent and in the North-West that doesn't go down well at all - but I couldn't find the same points of reference in terms of childhood experiences. I was still very, very down in myself as a disabled person, very poor sense of self-identity, didn't want to be a disabled person. This is what my childhood really instilled in me at school, and so when you come into a very, very alien environment, having no self-esteem, very poor self-identity and sense of where you fit, that only makes that sense of self-isolation worse. And in many ways, going back to sport, that was probably the thing that kept me together because I had this awful sense of isolated education experience and then on the complete flip side of that I had the sports environment where I felt really part of things, really included in terms of my fellow disabled athletes, and in many ways it felt a bit like a safety valve. I don't think I could have managed with the mainstream, if you like, if I hadn't had this area where I could at least pretend that all was well with the world, a kind of hideaway from the world, that's what that gave me along with an opportunity to play out my horrid competitiveness. I mean that thankfully did change in terms of those two worlds did start to marry together a bit. But it took quite a long time and it wasn't really until after I moved to London for work in 86 that those – sorts of things started to shift together, that I felt I wasn't living two completely separate lives. But I still had lots of issues around me as a disabled person as opposed to me as a Paralympic athlete. They felt like very different identities; and it really (I think this is what my type of education does to you)it really, in many senses, infantilise you - and what I mean by that is it takes (this isn't me uniquely, this is certainly the experience that I share with lots of other people with a similar childhood) is that it takes longer somehow to reach maturity, which didn't really matter with sport because it wasn't about that. You know, sport, particularly swimming, is about physical ability in many senses, it's not about your decision-making powers or anything like that, so in many ways that didn't really impact on my swimming. So it really wasn't until my late 20s and when I started to come to the end of my Paralympic career that who I was as a Paralympic athlete and who I was as Tara Flood, worker-bod, actually became the same person, which is very odd.

How did the Les Autres training, clubs and coaching work? How did you reconnect with swimming as a sport in Blackpool?

So when I returned home to the North-West the real problem that I found was finding somewhere to train (we are talking 83/84) I couldn't find a swimming club that would welcome me, that would even entertain having me anywhere near their training sessions. I can't remember what the club was called, but it was based in Blackpool, I did try going there a couple of times for an early morning session before college- and it was great. It was in a 50 metre pool which for me had been a real opportunity because I don't think at that point I had had experience of a 50 metre pool – because in New York at the International Games for the Disabled all of the events for my level of swimming classification were 25 metres or 50 metres and beyond, but in a 25 metre pool only. I think you get a

sense, don't you, of whether or not people are wanting you to be there and tying that up with what I said before about how I felt about myself, I didn't feel welcomed at all. They just let me swim in one of the lanes, so there was no connection with the other swimmers. It was a mainstream swimming club so I was the only disabled person there, didn't get access to what looked to me, at least from memory, really a very good collection of coaches, I think they even had a coach per lane, but none of those coaches thought that actually they could even share a tiny bit of their expertise with me. I think because – well, a number of reasons really - first of all coaching at the time really gave no attention to inclusive coaching methods; I think also there was a sense of, "Is she really an elite level swimmer? She has a significant physical impairment. Are we just letting her come to do a little bit of swimming?" I think disabled people, we are quite attuned to that feeling which is rarely spoken, so I think I went two or three times and gave it up. So then I went back to what I had been doing before which was that I was just swimming on my own. Two ways: I stayed at college during the week and went home at weekends so I was training at a 20 meter pool in the basement of a hotel in Blackpool during the week – four nights a week on, my own. (I got the student union to help me find a pool to train in because the college didn't have one.) And then at weekends I went to a swimming pool not far from where my parents lived. But at the time - what was I, sixteen, seventeen? – I hadn't learnt to drive at that point so I was absolutely reliant either on my dad or taxis – and this is the time long before Paralympic or elite level disabled athletes got near any sort of sponsorship so I was having to pay for that out of my own resources, or probably my parents, looking back on it. I don't think you can underestimate how difficult it is to train on your own, having the discipline to get there in the first place and then do the programme.

The useful thing was I had pretty good contacts with the swimming coaches within Les Autres, which was good in that the coach would always set me a programme to do on my own. What's useful to highlight here is that that wasn't the experience of all the swimmers at Les Autres, in that some Les Autres swimmers – and you won't be surprised to know, those with the less significant impairments – were finding some degree of integration within mainstream swimming clubs, so in Southampton for example I remember friends, Les Autres swimmers, who had a pretty good arrangement within a mainstream sports club in Southampton; also in Scotland for some reason had a very well-supported structure which was both disabled swimmers on their own but also inclusive opportunities too. I do think that there was one thing different for those of us with more significant levels of impairment, because that's certainly the experience of those of us (if we're looking at the swimming classifications as they are now - classification 5 down to 1) we found it very difficult to find club training opportunities. I think it was only in the last five years of my swimming career that I found a club to go to; I just got very good at training on my own – training on my own most of the time, don't forget that British Les Autres – I think that they had a very good structure given that this was 25, 30 years ago – that we went to monthly training camps at an army barracks up just outside Birmingham, all the sports, field sports, track and swimming, and we just stayed (I don't know if it's still there, but I think it was some sort of Territorial Army centre) so the weekends that we were there we were just in this vast training camp, they didn't have a pool on site but there was an arrangement so we could go to a local swimming pool – 25 meter, but that was fine - for the weekend, get up there Friday night and leave Sunday lunchtime and I think we had certainly three training sessions across the weekend plus the dry training, body-conditioning etc.. Looking back on it, it felt to me like quite an organised structure and I can't remember whether or not we ever had to pay for that; I don't think that we did, which is interesting. You know when you are competing you

are not interested in how the structure works or how things are organised – you're just interested in what your performance needs to be and whether or not you're going to win the gold, but I do remember towards the end of my swimming career wanting to (and I guess I was at that moment of politicisation as a disabled person) wanting to think a bit more about how the structures of disability sport operated and that was probably the thing that speeded up my exit from sport; because the minute I started to muddy the waters I started to become quite disaffected by it all really. Particularly I didn't like the way we were classified in such a medical way really. I remember, not at every single swimming event whether national, international or even European, that the whole process of classification, reclassification is very hard to take.

How did the classification work?

When I was swimming the Blunqvist classifications had been created by a Dutch healthcare professional of some description. From memory the Les Autres classification is the one that the classification system that is used now was based on. The reason being, because Les Autres was not just people with Cerebral Palsy, people with particular impairments, it was a whole collaboration of disabled people and in many ways it needed to have a classification system that was able to handle that so that swimmers with particular impairments were able to swim against swimmers with other impairments but with some degree of equity. So the classification system that Les Autres pioneered was the one that was then adopted, no doubt with adjustments, as the basis for the one that is used now. Because there was a need to categorise people it was never about impairment, it was about muscle-power, limb-length, horribly, horribly medical. I remember numerous times being classified and reclassified, having my arms and legs measured. And you know something, there is something so dehumanising about that, almost being seen as (I remember each classifier was medically trained) and there was always a process of getting up on a GP-type hospital bench, really like some kind of medical examination. But at the time I think we all knew that it was one of these necessary evils, if you like, that this is the process you have to go through, the barrier you have to jump over to be able to compete – but I don't think anyone liked the process, because there is so much about the power relationship in it. The disabled person is clearly the disempowered person in this relationship; the medical person, as always for disabled people, is the person with all the power, the person who decides where you fit within the classification system. And as an individual my view now about disabled people is that no one else is able to talk about me and my impairment better than me – and why wouldn't that be the case? But in those situations you have no power, no involvement in that conversation, you play no part in it other than to be, for want of a better expression, a slab of meat on the table. And that's how I felt, I never liked it; and I remember there was a number of times in the early days of international competition where my classification was challenged and there was an intention at one point to try and take me from Les Autres classification into an Amputee classification and I just remember being absolutely devastated that I was somehow being labelled as something entirely different from how I saw myself by people who probably didn't even know my name, but just saw me and my physicality. That probably doesn't sound like much at all, but there was something so, like I said before, something very dehumanising, and for someone to challenge that, it challenges the very things that you know about yourself. You know, it's the most amazingly positive experiences of competition and swimming, but I don't think I could say anything positive at all about how the classification system operates because of the imbalance of power between the classifier and the disabled person.

This was something that you tolerated initially and then it became too much?

I think tolerated is a very good way to describe it. It's the necessary evil that you have to put up with to enable you to compete. There is no way round. I think when I first competed internationally Les Autres, the staff within Les Autres, one of whom became one of the international classifiers, kind of gave each of us a classification, any of us that were new, that would then need to be re-assessed at the first completion and then whenever, and I'm sure it still happens; individuals' classifications are questioned and then a whole new process of reassessment has to happen. So an initial classification is given and then it has to be re-assessed and then there is a process, a constant watching of how you move in the water and how you move away from the water; Oh, there's something almost lab rat about it; you're constantly being watched and there was always this sense, which I always felt and it must be like it now, always this sense that somehow you were over-playing your impairment and that you were wanting...it's like the benefits agenda at the moment isn't it really...that somehow you were deliberately making your impairment appear to be more significant so that you could somehow get into a lower classification so that you could somehow be... I mean nonsense! Absolute nonsense! That's not what disabled athletes were about when I was competing; I cannot believe that that's changed much. Because this is about competition; it's about winning and it can never feel the same kind of victory if you know that you've (it's like taking drugs) if you know that you've somehow cheated the system to get there. Maybe I'm just a principled person on that, but it feels to me that it must cheapen the success. I don't think that's what athletes did. I'm not sure that athletes do that now.

You competed at New York in 1984; and then did you go to Seoul?

I did as Les Autres again; the competition hadn't combined even at that point. On a personal level that's going almost to the other side of the world and just experiencing something...It was very different from New York in terms of size, in terms of spectacle, it felt like where things were really starting to take shape in terms of it being a global elite sporting event – not in terms of looking back from Barcelona but in terms of comparing it with New York. I remember one of the real differences between New York and Seoul were the fact that the Korean government, local authorities or whatever they're called in South Korea, just packed the stadiums to the rafters: weirdly lots of churches, lots of school kids though which we all loved; and it was all very uniform and I don't know if it was groups within schools or schools themselves (we were never able to make connections with the crowds in terms of meeting or talking) but they were all assigned a particular country to support. But you know in New York the stadiums (well, stadiums, the arenas) were full of people who had travelled with the team, family, friends and maybe a few curious locals – what's that expression, one man and his dog. It felt like that for New York; I don't remember feeling bad about that or upset about that because I was so blown away by the opportunity to compete on an international stage (you become slightly less enamoured of that four years on after you've done other European events). Even now when I get together with other retired Paralympians we always laugh about that [at Seoul], because you couldn't move for spectators and they were there and – well who knows, they seemed to be enjoying it - but what we really loved was the fact that there was noise and cheering and that felt new and good. But it was still the case that it had very little public profile. At the time (and right up to Barcelona too) I was working full time, I worked up in the City then and I was swimming five evenings a week and three or four mornings a week - getting to the pool at 6 o'clock in the morning and starting work at 8.00 and then being back in the pool again at maybe

6.30, 7.00 in the evening. I look back on it now... I could only have done that as a young person, I could never do that now. But at the time it was just "Well this is what happens; this is what we all do." The sense of there being sponsorship just didn't even register. I guess that's because (and it goes back to this politicisation thing) when you're competing, when you're an athlete that's all you think about; it's only afterwards when you can reflect back a bit that you think it was crazy, the expectation on us to be elite-level sportspeople and hold down employment at the same time, or just have busy lives, just would not be the expectation now – and I couldn't be more pleased for that. But at the time that's how it was.

I also remember a funny thing about Seoul at the time I was vegetarian and I just remember the really terrible food there – very meaty – and the only thing someone suggested I could eat was boiled rice and KimChee, basically aged, spiced cabbage, it's cabbage that is sort of spiced and then put into the ground for months. My palate at the time found it absolutely disgusting. So in the end I was living on a diet, probably for not far off a fortnight, when I ate what I could get for breakfast and then for the rest of the time boiled rice and Thousand Island dressing – which is not really conducive as a sports diet. I look back on it and laugh, but at the time I remember just being so horrified that no other arrangement could be made – but I'm sure I probably had more to eat than I remember. The other thing is (and I think I said a bit about profile before) is that it was still the case that Paralympics (I can't talk about other countries) in the UK it had virtually no profile; there might have been a sort programme about it after the event, possibly? I can't actually remember, but virtually no media coverage at all. I remember at work people knew I was away and competing because the bank gave me what they called Special Leave, so time off to compete, but that would be the only way that any of my work colleagues would know that I was doing anything other than having standard annual leave. But I suppose when you are blinkered by competition I most of the time (we all most of the time) talked about how disappointing, how frustrating it was that so little coverage got back to the UK. But it wasn't really until Barcelona that I became more conscious of it. I became much more conscious of it in Barcelona and I remember saying ('cos in the lead up to Barcelona the BPA were very keen to do some heavy promotion of some athletes and I was one of those athletes) I don't know if you know but in the lead-up to Barcelona (do you remember that programme Challenge Anneka?) there was a Challenge Anneka programme – the challenge was to create an "infomercial" (film we'd call it now, I think!) about the Paralympics – well about the British Paralympic team – so we were in that, a group of swimmers, track athletes and some other sports. I've got a copy of it buried somewhere; it's about three minutes and it's all very heart-wrenching; the sound over it is from the Messiah or something. It's all very kind-of inspiring and you know, (for me it was probably more about ego; I was really chuffed to see my face in it, it was all quite exciting). I suppose what that told me at the time was that there was a shift in terms not only of the British Paralympic Association getting itself sorted in terms of the media machine but that actually there was the beginning of some media interest in the Paralympics. Yes some, small and heavily, heavily "triumph-over-tragedy" stories, impairment-specific ... not really about the sport at all but about the individuals and what we had somehow "triumphed" over to get into the pool or get onto the track. In the lead up, much closer to the games there were a series of films made, I think it was five or six of us - I was one of the athletes, Tanni Grey-Thompson (Tanni Grey as she was at the time) and a couple [of others] - we were followed in the lead up in terms of our preparation for the games. I think the idea was a very embryonic version of what they have now in terms of the Paralympic

ambassadors – a small group of Paralympic athletes who are seen as the faces of – I guess that was an embryonic way of doing that, but much learning has been done since.

In terms of the games there was a fundamental shift, not just in terms of audiences; we'd been to Barcelona the year before for a European swimming event, so we'd swum in the pool prior to the games – and there's something nice about that; it doesn't feel quite so mind-blowing. What I think we all noticed and certainly what I remember when I think back is the shift in the professionalism of the whole structure, so not just in us as athletes, but in the way the games actually functioned, the coaching, the classifiers, just the way that the whole games had been organised, loads and loads of people knowing what they were doing, clearly well-trained, everything ran very, very well (not always perfect), a very high profile in terms of Spain, opening ceremony and closing ceremony, packed arena I remember. And it really felt for the first time there was starting to be an equity with the Olympic Games approach to organising, and we all noticed that. It was tricky for me because, going into [19]92, I knew that the way I was feeling as a person and how I was beginning to see the world, I could feel that shifting. And I began in the lead-up to the games, probably in the 12 months, 6 months before, began to feel that I was wanting to challenge the way the BPA and the UK disability sports structure was functioning. It was always, but I became much more conscious of it, it was always about disabled people competing in sport and this huge swathe of non-disabled "experts", "professionals", I think I described them in some terms as "do-gooders", but lots of people who wanted control of us and who wanted the glory it felt, in many ways off the back of our achievements. That probably sounds bitter, I don't mean it to sound bitter, but it's really how things for me started to feel. I didn't feel, I couldn't see, disabled people who had been competing and [were] maybe now retired, coming through the ranks in terms of leadership roles; and I couldn't understand why that was because there were so many people who could have taken on those many, many roles and yet we weren't represented at anything other than athlete level. And I think that's something that I found increasingly difficult to swallow, and I had a couple of articles published very close to the games where I said this. You know how it is when your realisation or your thinking about the world starts to shift, there is a disconnect between the new way you think about things and what comes out of your mouth? So I was kind of verbalising all this stuff without doing a huge amount of thinking about the impact of what I was saying, but I realised very quickly what the impact was when I was starting to get some very.... It was becoming quite difficult in terms of how the staffing structure around the swimming, I could sense a shift in their attitude and behaviour towards me; I could sense that they were beginning to see me as "difficult" and challenging and not easy to control, I suppose – and on one level I really enjoyed that, but on another it did start to for me confuse my concentration in terms of getting the job done, i.e. getting my training in and really thinking and envisioning what I wanted to achieve. I mean, I knew what I wanted to achieve, I wanted to achieve gold medal in 50 metre breast stroke – that was it, anything else would be a bonus – and I did achieve that but that was with quite a lot of hard work in terms of me and my emotions and parking the beginnings of the disaffection for the time that it took to get to the end of the pool, I guess. But what we all loved was the recognition; having loads of people in Seoul was great, but what it felt like in Barcelona was the recognition of the sporting achievement – and that was different. That was different and that was fantastic. I remember at the time being interviewed after winning the gold, oh, you know, "What do you think people are going to say back in the UK?" And this sounds a bit bitter but it was how I felt at the time and in many ways similar now, is that I remember saying "But no one knows that we are here"! I knew that my family and friends and work-

colleagues would love it and would be really chuffed in terms of the achievement. But in terms of society, the general public in the UK, I knew that the vast majority had no idea it was going on or what it had taken to get there or that this was about sport rather than triumph-over-tragedy. I do think it's different now, but I guess this is about evolution. I imagine that people who competed in 1960 in Rome saw what happened in Barcelona and thought, "Wow! How different it is in 92 compared to how it was." And that's just how it goes; I mean that's the evolution in terms of how disabled people are perceived and how we perceive ourselves and how the identity and confidence of the disability community has shifted to a better pace. You somehow have to know that that's how it was then and at the time it was great and I couldn't have personally done any better. But twenty years on which is where we are now in 2012 again things have shifted hugely.

How much did your politicisation take the edge off the pleasure that you had in your success?

In terms of the breast stroke gold and the icing on the cake, the world record, nothing; nothing took away the pleasure of that. Because I'd absolutely gone there and achieved the one thing that I'd set myself the goal of achieving. The world record! I couldn't have asked for anything more than that, and I just remember being completely blown away by what that meant; and when you're in the moment of it and adrenaline's pumping – you don't know whether to laugh or cry – but what you bask in is the roar of the crowd when it happens (you know, that's about ego really, I mean it just is, I might as well be honest about that). But there's a point afterwards when the adrenaline has seeped away, you're back in the changing rooms or you're back in the athletes' village and then you start to think about, "So this is what it means to me, but what impact... what does that mean to everybody else?" I guess you want it to mean as much to everybody else as it means to you personally. It never is going to, but you want people to be proud of the achievement of a GB athlete; that's what you want, and that's what didn't happen.

The media is so far behind [even] now a shift in public perception around Paralympic sport. I don't think we are anywhere near as far as we need to be but, hey, that's again about evolution. But the media still feels so happy, or maybe comforted, by taking the medical-model approach in terms of "Well let's talk about impairment, let's talk about physicality, let's talk about what it's taken for you to somehow triumph over your impairment". This is not what it's about. It wasn't what it was about for me; it's not about any athletes I know. It's about the sporting achievement, it really is. Is it about a gold, is it about the world record, is it about a personal best? It doesn't really matter, but that's what it's about, the sporting achievement. So the politicisation and the beginnings of a different way of thinking about the world didn't take away from the pleasure of the now, the moment in time of winning the medal, but it does then start to shift your memory or your perception about the wider success of it. It was huge for me; I wanted it to be huge for everyone else; when I thought back on it, it probably wasn't, not because people wouldn't want it to be but because the media didn't give people the exposure, didn't set the tone for it. I think they still struggle. I don't think the media coverage of London 2012 – it could have been a great deal worse – it was better than it has been in previous years – [but] still so much to learn in terms of how disabled people have a right to be talked about in the media.

Swimming is always at the beginning of the Paralympics; my competition days were quite early on in terms of the whole Paralympic experience of Barcelona, so that's great for swimmers I think, and particularly for the "lower" classification swimmers, our events are always at the beginning of the

swimming programme rather than at the end (who knows why) but anyway I then still had a good number of days that I could spend just soaking up the rest of the games. I could spend time at different sports and really just enjoy the amazing success of the whole GB team, which was fantastic. But as I reached the end of our time at Barcelona I knew then that this would be my last games, because I knew that once I'd achieved what I'd achieved, I could only ever repeat it, that's all I could do, and in terms of how I was beginning to think about things, I always knew that that was going to start to be a much bigger part of my life – and that's absolutely come true in terms of where I am twenty years down the line.